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## STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

IS THIS THE GAME WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR?

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TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 5
ROCK BAND 4
SOMA

**STAY ON TARGET**

FROM TIE FIGHTER TO JEDI KNIGHT: THE GALAXY'S BEST STAR WARS GAMES
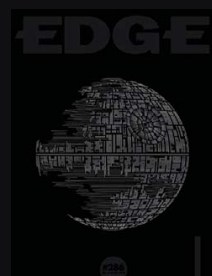
**#286**

DECEMBER 2015

# A long time ago in an Indian restaurant in north London

"As we talked and laughed drunkenly that night, Simon did something that would change me for ever, change us for ever. He picked up a condiment and moved it across the table making this sound: *Birbirbigitt Birbirbigitt bigitt*. I knew exactly what this was. Time slowed around us, a warm bubble of light inflated, and for a moment I couldn't see or hear anything but Simon. He was making the sound of the mouse droid that Chewbacca roars at in Star Wars. It was as if we were the only two people in the world. He got it, whatever it was. I understood him completely and he understood me… I guess one could argue we fell in love that day."

In describing how he formed a bond with his longtime collaborator Simon Pegg, **Nick Frost** provides a clear illustration of Star Wars' ability to do strange things to people. It is an entertainment behemoth that spans the globe and speaks to all ages, but among certain groups – often including those who were there to see the original movie trilogy on the big screen – it has a profound effect. You may like a bit of Star Wars, but the man who built a full-scale Millennium Falcon in his yard, and the people who spend £1,500 on replica lightsabers or dress up as Princess Leia to get married: what does the prospect of *Star Wars Battlefront* do to *these* people?

It's not that they haven't seen Star Wars games in the past, but never one that recreates those famous sights and sounds so vividly as it drops you into the mixer, fizzing explosions cascading around you as John Williams' score lifts the hairs on your neck. And rarely from people as passionate as the DICE developers currently finishing up the work of their lives. In our cover story, they tell us what they're bringing to a game that is certain to get even the most staunchly anti-multiplayer Star Wars fan connecting online. Your renowned Greedo impersonation over voice chat may not see you forming a lifelong friendship involving a sitcom, movie deals, and the flushing of birthday cake down hotel toilets, but you will be alongside others who appreciate the unique power of Lucasfilm's universe.


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# games

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# Will the revolution be televised?

As a new Apple TV arrives, we canvass the game development community for opinions on its potential

Finally revealed in early September, the new Apple TV isn't all that far away from a screenless iPhone that plugs into your television. That seems damning on paper, but it's a deliberate and shrewd move. While this model features a faster CPU and more RAM than the older spec, where it truly differentiates itself isn't the hardware upgrade, but that it has been designed to play games alongside streaming movies and TV. And it's tapping into the existing iOS ecosystem to do so: developers can make their app universal across your phone and the set-top box, while Handoff capabilities make it possible to start a game on one Apple device and resume it on another.

Apple's iPhone has had a famously transformative effect on the nature of games, helping to popularise free-to-play and making players of those who would never have bought consoles. Apple TV builds on that foundation. It's not a console per se, and gaming on it is largely designed to slip innocuously into daily routines and the short gaps between viewing sessions. The question is, where does that leave it for those who take a more active interest in games?

**Jeff Wofford**, the director of Electric Toy Co, reckons the new Apple TV is "something Apple had to do, but not something gamers have to have". He argues it's Apple's response to rivals (Amazon's Fire TV, Chromecast) making a play for the living room, offering little that's new or remarkable. Others are more optimistic. **Timo Vihola**, creative director at *Minigore* creator Mountain Sheep, considers the new Apple TV an

FROM TOP **Mountain Sheep's creative director, Timo Vihola; Snowman founder Ryan Cash; and FDG co-founder Philipp Döschl**

interesting combination of set-top box, smart TV and microconsole, backed by a company that has a proven track record in capturing a large audience.

No one believes Apple's gunning for Xbox or PlayStation's spot under your TV. "This isn't a device that's taking on the console market," says Snowman founder **Ryan Cash**, adding that many of his game-loving friends spend much of their spare time playing *Clash Of Clans* anyway, even in their living rooms.

In short, the new Apple TV could be a console for the everyman. This isn't a new idea, but, as FDG co-founder **Philipp Döschl** says: "Apple's strength isn't in creating new markets, but opening them up to a large audience. I hope Apple will do so again here with TV gaming, much like Nintendo did with Wii."

"Lack of storage is tricky for games using large amounts of persistent data for generated worlds"

**This line of** thinking might set some teeth on edge, but it excites plenty of developers. *Trick Shot* designer and Ustwo artist **Jonathan Topf** mulls that there "hasn't been a really good casual gaming platform for the living room yet", and reckons something low friction could be a boon. "If more people have access to games, that's a great thing. As we've seen with mobile, plenty of 'non-gamers' want to play games. I can see a whole new group of people having the same experience with Apple TV".

It's a line of thinking shared by **Jon Carter**, Harmonix's creative lead

on *Beat Sports*, a rhythmic minigame collection designed specifically for the new hardware. "I'm excited about Apple TV's potential to turn an enormous amount of people into living-room gamers," he says. "Not everyone wants to invest in a console, but if you're used to games on your iPhone, an Apple TV can introduce you to the wonders of large-screen gaming." He jokes his parents might "actually play one of my games when I'm not around", but this hides a serious point: developers should not underestimate this kind of untapped audience.

And with a different kind of userbase comes fresh opportunities. Vihola is excited about the prospect of smaller games, which rarely get a solid foothold on home consoles, in part due to strict submission rules. "Plenty of iOS devs have TV gaming ideas, but nowhere to publish them," he says. "It will be interesting to see if they find a home on this platform."

The hardware clearly appeals to developers too. "It's great and quite powerful," says Finji director **Adam Saltsman**, adding that the developer tools will be "very familiar to anyone developing for iOS already". He ported most of *Canabalt* in a couple of days, and estimates it will feel "fully native" in another week or so. **Rusty Moyher** reports a similar experience, quickly getting *Astro Party* running at 60fps. He says Apple TV is a "fast little device
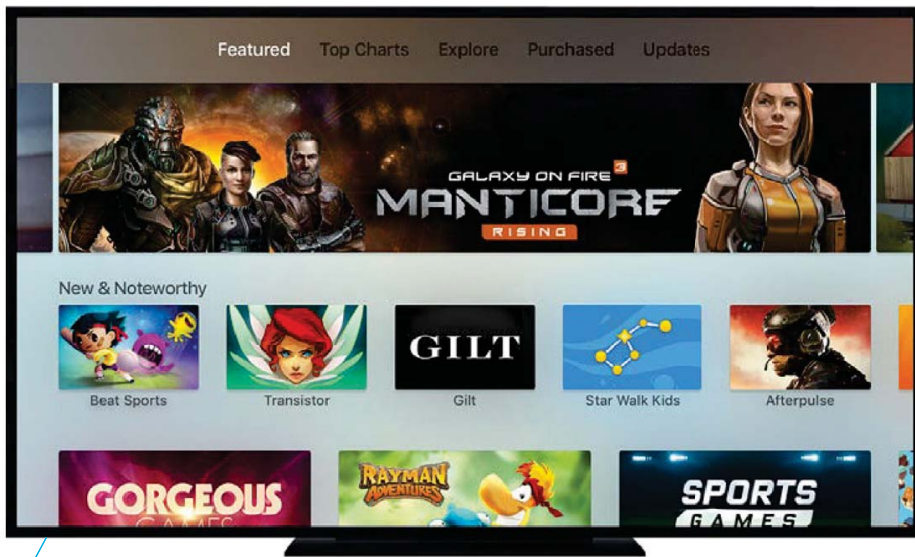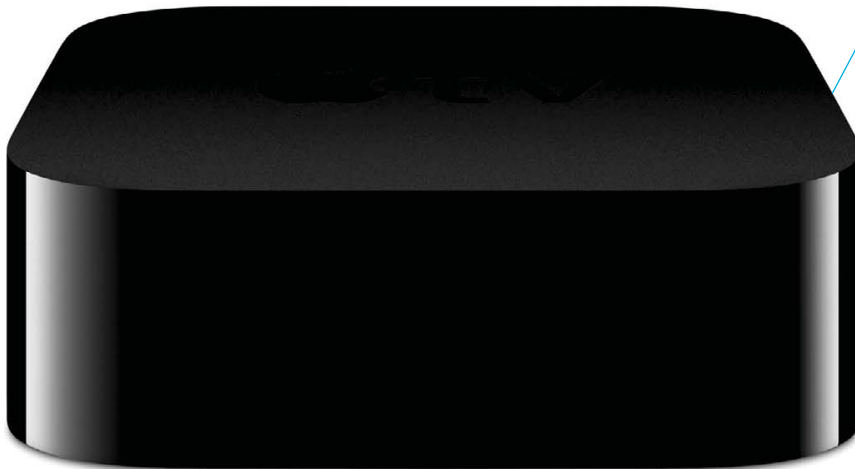
[and] at $150, it'll also be the cheapest device from Apple with an App Store".

However, other aspects of Apple TV development appear less welcome. While *Star Seed Origin* and *Word Forward* developer **Shane McCafferty** says it's been "a huge pleasure to work with only one aspect ratio and screen size for a change," Wofford is concerned that "the screen's only as good as your TV. You don't directly touch content. And while there's Wii-style gestural control, even Nintendo's downplayed movement-based gameplay of late. Will this be enough to make the new Apple TV a fresh, interesting gaming experience?"

Giant Spacekat founder **Brianna Wu** simply sees more work for people in supporting Apple TV: "You can't just add controller support and call it a day – playtesting requirements will be a huge timesink." She's also concerned about Apple limiting tvOS apps to 200MB of local storage, with further data needs being handled via downloadable bundles that can be purged from the system when not in use. While it should make those 32/64GB hard drives go further, it's a real hurdle for game developers. "This is a huge problem," says Wu. "It's fine when using Apple's native tools to build your games, but

serious [game] developers don't — and the engines we use just can't work on tvOS currently."

*Punch Quest* developer **Paul 'Madgarden' Pridham** echoes Wu's concerns: "Lack of storage is tricky for games using large amounts of persistent data for generated worlds. It could get tiresome for users if cached data is discarded by the system." Tree Men Games' **Jussi Pullinen** wonders if this "will be a bad thing for great games that would otherwise work perfectly on Apple TV, such as *AG Drive*". Chaotic Box's **Frank Condello** goes further, suggesting that it could "negatively impact larger ▶

The Apple TV App Store ❶ will launch with a few new titles and many ports. The device itself ❷ runs on a new A8 chip and has 2GB of RAM. Siri Remote ❸ features two mics for handling voice input
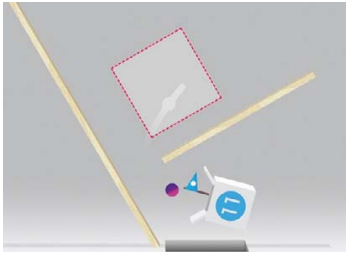
*Trick Shot*, a puzzle game built around trying to get a bouncy ball into the goal by pinging it around levels, relies on the kind of simple gestural inputs that suit Siri Remote and its glass touchscreen



*Galaxy On Fire – Manticore Rising* has been announced as an Apple TV exclusive, and will be a prequel to *Galaxy On Fire 3 – Manticore*

games or console ports, [perhaps] even discouraging developers enough to skip the platform entirely".

**Still, the most** controversial aspect of Apple TV development is its reliance on the Siri Remote. Apple 'discouraged' games that required thirdparty controllers at first, then banned them entirely. Now the party line is that Siri Remote must be supported for all Apple TV games. The controller has plenty of inputs, but not ones that map easily onto traditional pads – there's a small touch surface at one end that also accepts a click input; gesture controls, thanks to a built-in accelerometer and gyroscope; and the play/pause key becomes a button for gaming when the remote's flipped on its side.

"This affords an incredible amount of intuitive interactions," says Carter, whose *Beat Sports* has taken obvious cues from *Wii Sports*. Saltsman is more guarded, however: "The Siri Remote is a really neat piece of hardware, but its feel varies a lot from game to game. Taps feel nice on the surface. Clicks feel good but are super-decisive – more like a mouse double-click from a player psychology standpoint. Swipes feel quite good, but the gesture recogniser is laggier than for light touches."

By contrast, McCafferty is unhappy with having so few traditional buttons to work with. "The remote limits us," he says, "because there's only one usable button to map – the trackpad button often won't be usable when the player's using the trackpad for movement". Moyher questions making Siri Remote mandatory, given that "the living room is well suited to longer, deeper gaming sessions, but the Siri Remote seems best suited for simple swipe- or turn-based games". Damp Gnat



FROM TOP **Zach Gage, Damp Gnat's Reece Millidge, and Alex Verrey, Mad Catz's global PR director**

developer **Reece Millidge** believes Apple's controller won't work well for "binary controlled platform games, such as my own *Icycle*". He does, however, admit that "there is uncertainty regarding what percentage of owners will buy a thirdparty games controller".

Millidge concedes that purely gestural games may turn out to be successful, but remains sceptical. Vihola reckons Apple should have bundled a console-style controller with the new unit to enable a bigger launch library.

That would suggest a greater focus on gaming than a set-top box with 'TV' in the name perhaps warrants. And while Apple may relent on its mandate or the remote's design in future, it makes sense to ensure that the day-one buyer isn't faced with a store full of games that require additional hardware to play. "This [Siri Remote rule] frustrates developers but is good for the ecosystem as a whole," says Wu. "You just can't ask normal people to buy a second controller to play a game that costs a dollar. All they'll understand is the feeling of being ripped off."

Nitrome MD **Mat Annal** agrees, although he says it "would have been nice had Apple put more thought into making the Siri Remote more versatile. Would it have hurt so much to have a

> "You just can't ask normal people to buy a second controller to play a game that costs a dollar"

couple of game-focused buttons on there in all that dead space?"

Despite Apple's rules, several thirdparty companies are eager to fill any perceived void regarding traditional controllers. Mad Catz global PR director **Alex Verrey** says his company has long believed mobile will emerge as the dominant gaming platform. This in part will be through "people connecting devices to TVs and sitting back to play". He reckons Apple TV will accelerate this process, but still thinks this leaves plenty of space for console-style pads. He also hopes that in time we'll see Apple "embrace a wide variety of control devices, dictated by the content available".

The immediate problem, though, according to iOS indie luminary **Zach Gage**, is that "it will be very difficult for developers to truly take advantage of the full set of buttons on an MFi controller, due to Apple's restrictions". This won't, he feels, stop quality games from arriving, but will "limit the capacity of the Apple TV to compete with console-style titles".

There are workarounds, however. Condello says some developers are using cutdown control schemes for Siri Remote, with auto-fire and other tricks, and then fleshing out the input variety when an ▶

The Nimbus resembles other MFi controllers but includes a prominent Menu button with which to navigate TV functions, and also incorporates a proprietary Lightning port

# IN CONTROL

Craig Olsen on the Nimbus and SteelSeries's Apple TV ambitions

With SteelSeries hardware featuring on Apple's own product page for Apple TV, **Craig Olsen**, its president of worldwide mobile, is unsurprisingly bullish. He reckons the set-top box will be a "rich, immersive, and rewarding experience" for millions of people.

Nimbus is the first pad to be revealed that was built specifically with the hardware in mind, even if Apple's own focus has switched to ensure Siri Remote is universally supported across tvOS's App Store. Olsen diplomatically says Apple's controller is "remarkable, as one

would expect – an impressive feat of engineering that delivers a great experience for consumers who use it to play games". Yet he still believes "some consumers will prefer a more familiar button and trigger layout".

Even if controllers might now be somewhat sidelined, Olsen doesn't appear downcast: "We felt the chance to build a gamepad controller for the new Apple TV represented a singular opportunity not only for SteelSeries, but also for consumers, in that we were confident we could do it better than

anyone else." He adds that the Nimbus represents the company's most extensive R&D effort ever. Despite retailing well below previous MFi efforts ($50), the Nimbus boasts a Lightning port, 40 hours of playing time per charge, and premium components throughout. "It will also control other content on the Apple TV," Olsen says, "meaning that for as low as $199, someone can have a new Apple TV, complete with both Siri [Remote] and Nimbus controllers. That's a complete entertainment and gaming platform for a remarkably low price."

MFi controller is detected. As 10tons Ltd producer **Jaakko Maaniemi** says, "It'll be interesting to see how many games go for bare-minimum Siri Remote functionality and offer the 'real' experience with a gamepad, and ultimately where Apple draws the line regarding the level of acceptable bare minimum. But I'm confident the other end of the spectrum will have brilliant Siri Remote gaming experiences — and those are the games to keep an eye on."

## Some developers nonetheless

remain baffled by Apple's demands, not least because it impacts existing titles. "IOS has great games with MFi controller support, but Apple ruled them out with its ridiculous decision," says MR Games' **Gary Riches**, before asking why Apple didn't just use prompts to warn users buying games about specific requirements. Secret Exit CEO **Jani Kahrama** believes it handicaps entire genres: "Some will be impossible to implement in a satisfactory manner if the requirement sticks. Apple TV will be a platform held back not by hardware, but by policy. It will be challenging for developers to adapt anything but the most casual of gaming experiences."

Wu suggests this is likely deliberate: "It's telling Harmonix's game that debuted at the Apple event is a simple one, where you push a button in time to music. It has simple mechanics and graphics, and a

low memory footprint. These kinds of simple experiences will dominate Apple TV." She finds this a disappointment, not least because she believes iOS gaming's biggest shortcoming is in most games being "simple, forgettable experiences that don't move you emotionally".

TheCodingMonkeys CEO **Martin Pittenauer** offers a different take: "In the past few years, some titles that moved gaming forward as a medium did not rely on complex, traditional controls, and Siri Remote might be a good fit for them." He adds that Apple's rules merely provide a "design constraint that ultimately improves the quality of available games".

EightyEight Games designer **Luca Redwood** thinks similarly: "The most interesting things often come from constraints. Also, I see the Apple TV being complementary to a traditional console, rather than a replacement. Games that will shine will be quick experiences you can get into while someone pauses the TV to answer the phone. If you want a full-on gaming session, use a console."

Still, with an untested platform, it's likely we'll initially see a flurry of iOS ports, or attempts to rework known properties. Pridham, for example, is working on bringing his simplest, "one-handed" fare, such as *Chillaxian*, to Apple TV, and is eager to see how the "heavy-duty launch titles adapt to a 1.5-button remote".

For Gage, the big question is which mobile originals will be better on the TV than on your iPhone. He does, though, note that TV gaming has "a gigantic cultural history of how to solve control and interface issues" that developers can draw on, easing transition problems. This should help developers get over the initial bump Condello describes: "It's surprisingly easy to get an iOS game running on tvOS — but there's a bit of work between 'running' and 'playable'."

Topf wonders how many developers, eager to minimise costs and capitalise on the fresh audience of Apple TV, will port games that "shouldn't be a safe bet and fight Siri Remote, resulting in a crappy experience". Annal posits many mobile hits simply won't be viable: "*Candy Crush* would be much harder to play. Twin-stick shooters are out!" In time, Condello reckons we'll see games built specifically for Siri Remote, although Riches echoes Gage, asking, "What will drive someone to turn on the telly, switch to the Apple TV and play a game that will also be on their iPhone?" Gosuen believes a major rethink is the only way forward: "We will have to recreate our base. *Mario* was the base design for consoles years ago. *Canabalt* is a kind of base for mobile. For Apple TV, we must reinvent games for the place they were born: the TV."

The problem is money. Redwood believes that until a standout game proves the viability of the platform and justifies all

the extra work, developers will remain cautious. This is a common concern. Condello grumbles about Apple's push towards 'universal purchasing' and a likely backlash should anyone create Apple TV-only games, saying, "It's iPad all over again." Bad Crane designer and developer **Markus Kaikkonen** says he'd be "delighted if Apple TV brought life to the paid indie market, because even buying a $2 mobile game feels like an investment for many". Vihola, though, looks at the current reality of iOS: "Free-to-play dominates. Worse, most top-grossing free-to-play games are years old. By comparison, top-selling PS4 titles constantly change as new games arrive."

**Despite the concerns** surrounding the controller, associated economics, and even the games themselves, one thing's certain: we'd be foolish to write Apple TV off as a platform for gaming. Gage warns to "not discount how amazing it is

> "Getting a console for $150 and new premium games for $5 or less seems like a great deal"

to have a TV box that is simple to develop for", while Condello jokes that "people always vastly underestimate Apple's ability to sell shiny new things". While it never reached iPhone's heights, Apple TV's previous form was still a success – it was in the top five brands for streaming media devices in the US in 2014. If its successor can even equal that achievement, then it will be an attractive platform for development, regardless of its shortcomings.

From an adoption standpoint, however, Saltsman wonders how Apple will fare with hardware that's priced significantly higher than the growing pool of HDMI sticks and rival boxes. Kaikkonen sees the value proposition as reasonable: iOS already has titles that feel like full-blown console releases, he says, and so "getting a console for $150 and new premium games for $5 or less seems like a great deal". But Riches notes that if you factor in MFi controllers for multiple users, the overall cost rises to that of a second-hand Xbox One.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Guitar Hero Live, Metal-Morph, Transistor* and *Shadowmatic* were all revealed at Apple's event in September



**Canabalt** creator **Adam Saltsman** is cautiously optimistic about Apple TV

Fundamentally, though, it's the games that count. Wofford won't turn down an opportunity, saying he's supporting Apple TV because "it's relatively easy to do and expands my market". But he reckons few people will buy Apple TV for games, and that Apple "probably doesn't see it as a gaming revolution, or even an evolution. I think Apple sees games on Apple TV as a necessary feature for a necessary platform. It may be a gaming platform, but it's not a gamer's platform."

Cash urges patience: "I don't think Apple TV will change everything right away, but I believe it will become a big part of living-room gaming." He notes the new Apple TV from a gaming perspective should really be considered as a first-generation device, but as devices increase in power and developers have time to experiment with them, we'll see games improve steadily. "We've already seen this happen with iOS, and so we'll eventually get console-level gaming on Apple TV," he predicts. "In the meantime, we'll get lots of fun casual gaming — and people who usually only play games on their iPhones might finally be drawn to the big screen." ■

**The Touch controller is still being fine-tuned, but it is a powerful part of the overall Oculus Rift proposition**

# Connecting with Oculus

At Oculus Connect 2 in LA, attention turns from refining VR technology to what developers are doing with it now that it's almost ready to roll out

**W**ere Confucius alive today and in the habit of writing proverbs about the videogame industry, he might well say, "Listen to **John Carmack**". The man who programmed *Doom* and *Quake*, started his own aeronautics company as a hobby, and has been working on virtual reality at Oculus since 2013 usually has a pretty good idea where the technology and business of videogames are heading. A year ago, his keynote at the inaugural Oculus Connect in Los Angeles was focused on the difficult programming challenges required to make VR possible on smartphones with

Oculus's GearVR. This year, he wanted to talk about something different: *Minecraft*.

*Minecraft* was likely the most important game announced for Rift (and GearVR) at this year's Oculus Connect 2 event. "I call this my grail," Carmack said during his keynote. "It's been my quest for the past year and a half."

Mojang's game itself didn't dominate Carmack's keynote, but content, in general, did. Oculus's chief technical officer took a telling break from programmer speak to talk about games.

"If you had a magic wand and could say, 'I will create the perfect virtual reality

headset that completely solves all the problems and is indistinguishable from reality,' would that be a super-successful product with the content that exists at this instant? You would run out of things to do fairly quickly," Carmack said. "On the other hand, if I had the magic wand and could say, 'I want the perfect content for the hardware that exists today,' that would be a phenomenal product. It would be incredible. You see flashes of brilliance, signs of the future in the things we have right now. But they're isolated. It's so sparse. You can see something and say, 'That was really awesome. That was

Henry is Oculus Story Studio's second film. The division's character lead, Bernhard Haux, previously held a similar role at Pixar





The VR-powered sculpting tool Medium in action (above). At Oculus Connect 2, John Carmack (right) put his focus on the games, not the hardware

the moment there. If we had so much more of that…' Or, 'I had a great experience there but now it's done – what do I go on next?' It's been clear to me over the last year that content's the thing that needs the most effort from us. And it wasn't as clear a year ago."

Carmack's focus on games over hardware set a theme for Oculus Connect 2. For the first time in three years, Oculus didn't have a brand-new headset or controller to show off at a major event, since the company is in the process of perfecting its Rift and Touch hardware and preparing for full-scale

manufacturing. This is the end of the Oculus Rift as a promising accessory, and the beginning of VR as videogaming's next big thing – or next big flop. The Oculus Touch games being demoed at this year's conference made a strong argument for the former.

**Oculus's Touch controller** is a perfect illustration of the credo 'good design is invisible'. It's hardware that feels so well crafted that its design seems obvious in hindsight. Of *course* this is the right way to incorporate motion control in virtual reality. Anyone could've thought of

it. The reality, of course, involved many months of iteration. Oculus made hundreds of prototypes, according to founder Palmer Luckey, to arrive at the design for Touch, a small nub of a controller with two key triggers for the index and middle fingers. Pulling the index finger trigger feels similar to the trigger on a traditional game controller and serves as the 'action' button for most Touch games. But the middle finger trigger is where the magic happens: pressing it feels just like closing your hand into a fist, and it naturally serves as the 'grab' button for many Touch

Epic's Tim Sweeney believes that VR is an easy sell – once potential consumers get to actually try it

games. It's an instantly intuitive process. The top of the controller is home to a joystick and a pair of buttons, allowing the hardware to cover the same button inputs as most gamepads.

A ring encircling the device houses sensors that the Oculus base station can detect for 1:1 positioning, and the hardware's motion sensing feels fast and precise. The controllers are wireless and extremely light, which helps to create a sensation of them disappearing once you have them in your hands and slip into VR. Touch's one significant limitation, at least in comparison to SteamVR controllers, is range. The Oculus sensor has a relatively small radius compared to Valve's room-spanning laser scan system, and although the finalised Touch unit will ship with a second sensor to complement the one that comes with the base Rift hardware, it most likely won't be enough to match SteamVR's tracking range.

Touch faces another roadblock: it won't be in the box when Oculus ships in the first quarter of 2016. Quizzed about the decision to sell Touch separately, Oculus VP of product **Nate Mitchell** concedes that there are issues. "It's a hard decision. There are a lot of trade-offs," he says. "Price will be the biggest barrier to entry. I think content will be number two. I think in the beginning of Touch you're going to see mostly indie games from developers who can afford to take a risk, who believe, who want it out there."

But Mitchell lists plenty of reasons why launching the Rift headset before the Touch component is ready is the right move. As he notes, an affordable price tag will be key to Oculus's chances of success at launch. In addition, not many Touch-dedicated games exist right now, but there are many gamepad titles in development, and they will be available to ship before the Touch hardware is completely finalised. "Starting the ecosystem as soon as possible on the Rift side is really important," Mitchell says.

There are already interesting, fun VR games coming to Rift that are playable

with an Xbox One controller, which will be packed in the box, but it's hard to overstate just how much more immersive VR is when your hands feel perfectly captured in the virtual world. In moments where we've felt true 'presence' — Oculus's favoured word for your brain truly buying into your virtual surroundings — the usual instinct is to reach out and touch something. Normally, we can't do that, but Touch changes the rules, and the difference is genuinely profound.

**Oculus's biggest in-house** reveal at Connect was a sculpting application named Medium, which allows you to build and paint in VR using the Touch controllers. It's a surprisingly fun, powerful toolset, even for someone without much artistic skill. The simplicity of the tools is inviting and allows for quick switching between creating or erasing mass, changing the size of your 'brush', smoothing out rough pieces, and painting onto the sculpting surface. More advanced tools let you sculpt along a mirrored surface to create symmetry. Another mirrors a pottery wheel, letting you add sculpture material as your creation spins through 360 degrees.

> "It's a hard decision. There are a lot of trade-offs. Price will be the biggest barrier to entry"

Sculpting in Medium makes you aware of the Touch sensor's limitations. Instead of walking around an object, it's easier to rotate it in space; walking is likely to move you out of the sensor's field of view, and putting your back to the sensor breaks tracking with the Touch controllers.

Even so, Medium demonstrates a certain amount of VR's potential outside of games. Oculus says that models will be exportable from the application, which may make it a practical prototyping tool for artists with real 3D modelling chops.

The best thing about the demo is sharing it with another human being: an Oculus engineer talks us through our art lesson, her translucent avatar head and hands floating in virtual space near ours. The social implications are clear, and it's no coincidence that multi-user features show up more than a few times during



Rift hardware still has no official price, although Oculus's Palmer Luckey expects it to exceed $350

Connect 2, particularly in apps such as Twitch and Netflix for GearVR, the $100 Samsung-made unit that will bring VR to Galaxy S6 and Note 5 phones.

As with Rift, the focus for GearVR at Oculus Connect 2 was mostly on content rather than the technology, showing video apps and vintage games playable in VR. Watching a Twitch stream and seeing and hearing the avatars of other people sitting in a virtual room with you proves surprisingly fun, but is it fun enough to see you strapping a smartphone to your head for extended periods of time?

That question has been applicable in a broad sense since VR reemerged in 2012. Is strapping on a headset to play games a truly massmarket prospect? Will the experience be worth it? The thousand developers who congregated at Oculus Connect 2 certainly think so, and the number of games they're creating for the launch of Oculus Rift next year will at least give it a fighting chance.

It'll be their job to convert the faithless when Rift is finally released. Then again, maybe they won't have to work very hard. "I've never met a sceptic of VR who has tried it," Epic Games founder and CEO **Tim Sweeney** told tech website Re/Code during Connect. Strap enough Rifts onto enough heads, and consumer VR may be off and running. ■

## NARCOSIS

**Developer** Honor Code  **Format** Rift
**Control** Gamepad

Part *BioShock*, part *Gone Home*, *Narcosis* is a psychological adventure game set under the sea. The atmosphere is tense, although it feels pretty clunky at this stage in its development. *Narcosis* is focused on telling a story, but poor animation can easily break immersion in VR environments.



## CHRONOS

**Developer** Gunfire Games  **Format** Rift
**Control** Gamepad

A thirdperson game from a team with previous experience on the *Darksiders* series, *Chronos* is an action-RPG whose locked camera angles and moody lighting help to distinguish it. Otherwise it feels quite familiar, a little bit like classic *Tomb Raider*, with a few *Zelda* influences thrown in.



## LUCKY'S TALE

**Developer** Playful Corp  **Format** Rift
**Control** Gamepad

*Lucky's Tale* surprised everyone in 2014 by showing how engaging a platformer could be in VR, at a time when everyone was experimenting with firstperson. What's been shown so far is simple and unabashedly *Mario*-esque, but creative level design could yet make the game worth persevering with.



## EDGE OF NOWHERE

**Developer** Insomniac Games  **Format** Rift
**Control** Gamepad

One of the first Rift attempts at the horror genre uses a moving camera to build tension, which unfortunately brings about nausea in our demo. Though it succeeds in feeling creepy, it's too early to tell if this will turn into a taut platform-based adventure or a mostly on-rails story-driven game.



## JOB SIMULATOR

**Developer** Owlchemy Labs  **Format** Rift/Vive
**Control** Touch/Vive controller

The most fun Touch game we've played, this is an absurdist simulation parody that drops you into a cartoony office environment with dozens of objects to interact with. In firstperson, we eat a mouldy donut and vomit over a cubicle, drink coffee, and have a paper airplane fight with robot coworkers.
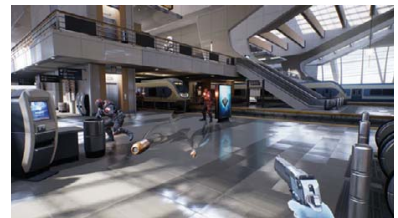


## BULLET TRAIN

**Developer** Epic Games  **Format** Rift
**Control** Touch

Epic's shooting gallery proves that blasting tons of bad guys with guns and grenades will be popular in VR (as if there was any doubt). The highlight of the demo has you grabbing bullets in slo-mo and throwing them back, then watching as your targets ragdoll across the environment.



## FINAL APPROACH

**Developer** Phaser Lock Interactive  **Format** Rift/Vive
**Control** Touch/Vive controller

*Final Approach* has you drawing flight paths to runways with your Touch controller so that planes can land without colliding. It's a concept that recalls various touchscreen games, but it feels considerably more dynamic in this context, and the viewpoint bodes well for strategy-leaning games in general.



## I EXPECT YOU TO DIE

**Developer** Schell Games  **Format** Rift
**Control** Touch/mouse+keys

A smart demonstration of how much detail can be packed into a small VR space within arm's reach, *I Expect You To Die* places you in a trap, trying to disarm a bomb within five minutes. Escaping requires deduction, manipulating objects, and some keen observation of your surroundings.



## AIRMECH

**Developer** Carbon Games  **Format** Rift
**Control** Gamepad

A great example of how VR can transform an existing game, *Airmech* is an RTS being tweaked for Rift. Being inside the world with a god's-eye view makes oncoming waves of enemies look like little toys invading a diorama city, and also makes keeping an eye on everything more overwhelming.

# Driving beat

How FOAM is combining musical leanings with a need for speed in Drive Any Track

Talking to **Steve Milbourne** and **Phil Clandillon**, co-founders of London-based developer FOAM, about their path into game creation feels like an impromptu trip to the pub. They're a relentless tag team – two friends with a 15-year history who chat about their achievements offhandedly ("Steve made a music video on his mum's camcorder and it got on MTV," says Clandillon), as if each step of their music industry career in the early days of the Internet was the by-product of a good night out. But once talk turns to their debut game, *Drive Any Track*, expertise of the sort only long experience provides peeks through

They're music buffs first and foremost, having spun FOAM out from a collision of minds in the tech department at Sony's music label. Or rather, they *were* the tech department. As Clandillon and Milbourne tell it, there were precious few people around the turn of the millennium who had combined the web with music in a creative capacity.

Milbourne, the son of programmers, fell into it naturally. "Around the early 2000s," he says, "I went to work for an indie record company, and they didn't even really have the Internet there – they were still just answering phones. I got the Internet in and did some digital stuff, started coding and designing."

As a web-based graphic designer, Clandillon found himself in a similar position, fiddling with Flash in service of indie dance labels before anyone else had the chance. Though the notion of 'getting the Internet in' as being any more involved than ringing up an ISP is now unthinkable, it caught Sony's attention, and the pair were headhunted.

"We kind of had free rein," Clandillon tells us, "because Sony said, 'We don't know anything about all this



FROM TOP **FOAM co-founders Phil Clandillon and Steve Milbourne**

tech stuff. We'll give you some money; just go sit in a corner somewhere and do it.'"

Quite how their experiments with Flash and PHP morphed into a cabinet of advertising awards neither seems sure, but shoehorning the video for AC/DC's Rock 'N' Roll Train into an Excel spreadsheet as ASCII art spat out one MediaGuardian Innovation Award, two Cannes Lions, a CLIO, a UK Music Video Award and over a million first-week downloads. Milbourne is still bemused.

"The marketing person came to see us, gave us a £500 budget and said, 'Can you do something on Facebook for AC/DC?' They were a total not-digital band – they didn't even have their music online at that point [2008]. But we looked at the market research, and none of the people who were their fans can really access Facebook at work."

"We thought, 'Right, we can get through the firewall by putting some content in Excel,'" Clandillon explains. "The difficulty was programming ASCII to run like a video. We found this Bulgarian guy, Svet, who agreed to do it for about £150. It took him ten minutes! We converted the video line by line into ASCII art and ended up with this massive array of text, and every 25 lines we just looped the array."

**FOAM operated as** a side project within Sony for about a year before going solo. And *Drive Any Track* is the unashamed product of music geeks and petrolheads, coming at a time when both founders feel current consoles and Steam Early Access demonstrate potential for music games beyond hitting things on

rhythm. Their custom engine, the Musical Environment Gaming Algorithm (MEGA), pulls out the 'big moments' from any track in a music library and generates a course that follows the ebb and flow of the song.

"We started by using a platform called the Echo Nest," Clandillon tells us, "which was available online. It was an API, and it returned music analysis data. We started to use that as some building blocks to build racetracks and stuff."

"Echo Nest were really good with us," Milbourne says, "and then they got bought by Spotify, who shut it down for public use."

FOAM was forced to write its own tech, and followed that up with several massive database wipes, obliterating every player-generated track when MEGA was found to be spitting out impossible stunts. Early Access punters are not renowned for their patience, but FOAM has got almost all its early adopters on side, and the team swears by the process.

"We'd never have been able to get a sample size big enough to test all the procedural generation," says Milbourne. "There were 100,000 songs in the database when we wiped it. Even if we got a testing company in, they wouldn't be able to convert that many songs."

Confronted with their easy passion for games and music, and their willingness to drop or experiment with features at the community's behest, it's hard to imagine something like a few database wipes souring FOAM's standing. The pair's heaving trophy case and the expertise necessary to busk something like MEGA are masked entirely by the feeling that FOAM belongs among the fans. ∎

> MEGA pulls out the 'big moments' from music and generates courses that follow the ebb and flow

**0080**    **000047824**
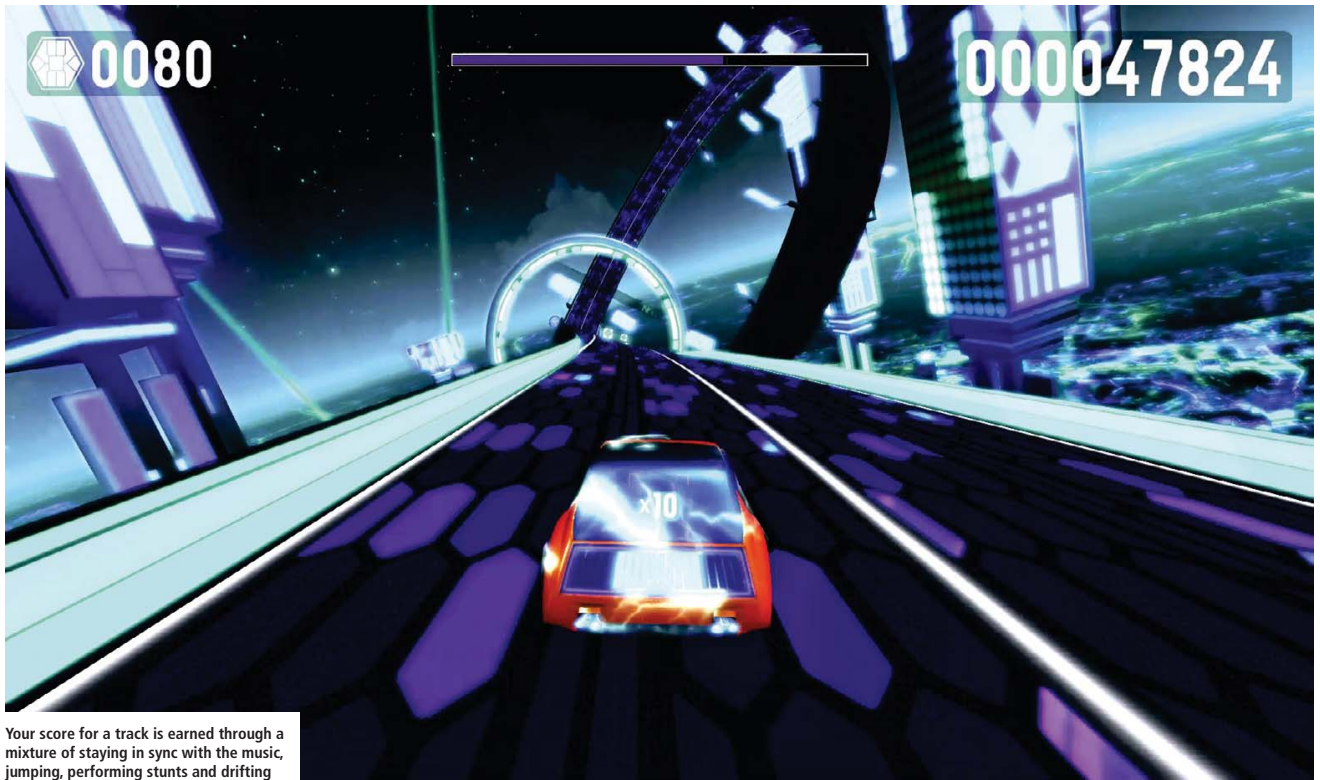
Your score for a track is earned through a mixture of staying in sync with the music, jumping, performing stunts and drifting

**0040**    **000022165**

Cars and environments are designed to suit the genre of music you select, though the art style rarely veers away from sleek, neon-drenched futurism

**DAT**
DRIVE ANY TRACK
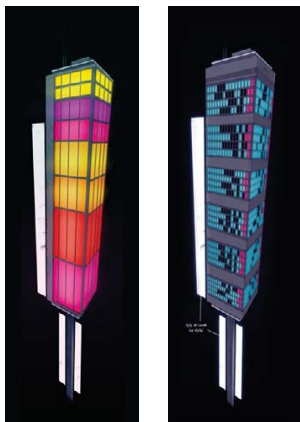
In *Drive Any Track*, a given song produces the same course for all players, which is assigned a difficulty rating. That's where MEGA can mess up – being unable to judge what a human considers hard. It's a serious machine learning problem, so FOAM has turned to the crowd for help, building a chart system to get the best tracks voted to the top, and tweaking the code to ensure the extremes of challenge are right. "There was a point where it didn't feel so exciting any more, because we'd made everything too safe," says Milbourne. "Now, if you play an absolutely nuts track, it's going to be nuts!"

# BY ROYAL DEGREES

Former Klei and Microsoft devs roll the dice on a boardgame-inspired Roguelike

IronOak Games' perennially autumnal *For The King* is a turn-based, co-op Roguelike steeped in nostalgia. Based on a prototype boardgame that was itself inspired by videogame RPG classics, it aims to evoke memories of tabletop and videogame sessions as much as childhood adventures.

"When it came time to decide what the art style should look like, it was important to me to retain both [the boardgame and RPG] connections," art director **Gordon Moran** tells us. "The low-poly style hearkens back to the late-'90s era of classic JRPGs, while the stylisation of our characters and creatures is heavily influenced by tabletop miniatures. It was important to retain a tactile quality to the graphics because we wanted an emotional connection between the player and the characters."

The low-poly aesthetic was inspired by Moran's time at United Front, where he worked on *ModNation Racers* and *LittleBigPlanet Karting*, and *Don't Starve* creator Klei Entertainment. "Klei has some of the best artists and animators in the industry, and it was a really inspirational experience working there," he says. "But I've been fortunate enough to have had the chance to work with many amazingly talented people throughout my career, and they've all inspired me to varying degrees."

In keeping with its mechanical inspiration, *For The King*'s beautiful worlds are procedurally generated and populated from what Moran describes as a "massive library" of assets and enemy types. "As an artist, working with procedural content can be tricky at times due to the lack of control over composition," he explains. "However, on the flip side, it's amazing to see some of the worlds our game engine creates. That's the thing about procedural content – what you lose in terms of control you gain back tenfold in terms of variety and unexpected beauty."

Having smashed its $40,000 Kickstarter goal, *For The King* clearly resonates with its intended audience. The game is planned to debut on PC in June 2016, but IronOak hopes to follow up with console versions, too. ■

"Having our lore master, Sean Hoyle, involved right from the start meant we could create a richly detailed world that felt unique yet believable," Moran explains. "Every town, every realm and every creature has a history and a backstory"

# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"The first *The Last Of Us*… Uh, did I say 'the first *The Last Of Us*?' The first *The Last Of Us*. *The Last Of Us*. The first *Last Of Us*. *The Last Of Us* was also keyframe animation."

Naughty Dog writer **Josh Scherr** subtly covers his tracks in a livestream

"Eighteen quintillion planets? **That's a hard number to wrap your head around.** Aren't you worried that the game might get boring after the first trillion?"

**Stephen Colbert** puts the challenging *No Man's Sky* questions to Sean Murray

**"I have to say that I'm incredibly disappointed in all of this.** This sort of drama is not what I, or you, signed up for with *Star Citizen*."

**Chris Roberts** responds to legally unrepeatable allegations about working conditions at Cloud Imperium Games

"Developers **shouldn't be making you sick.** It's no longer [VR] hardware's fault. It's developers' choices that are making you sick. Tell them you don't want that."

Valve's **Chet Faliszek** wants you to call out nauseating dev practices. Like paid-for mods?

## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

**Game** *Point Blank X*
**Manufacturer** Bandai Namco

Bandai Namco is working on the first arcade version of *Point Blank* for 15 years. Currently titled *Point Blank X*, the game is the series' fourth instalment proper (though DS and iOS versions have been released since 2000's *Point Blank 3*). The prototype cab is currently being tested, and still subject to last-minute changes, but Bandai Namco has confirmed that the twoplayer cabinet will be ticket redemption compatible.

The cabinet itself is a relatively modest proposition, sporting an unusually small 32-inch screen and two no-frills plastic guns in pink and blue. A shock of attention-grabbing neon on each side of the screen and a brightly lit recess for the guns ensures *Point Blank X* isn't an arcade wallflower, though. And, as you would expect, that monitor is HD, so *Point Blank*'s barmy, colour-rich artwork should leap from the screen.

Structurally, the game differs little from earlier entries, offering up 40 themed microstages, which test players' mettle for 20 to 30 seconds, and three different difficulty settings. As well as these, there's also a Kid mode that exaggerates targets' size – presumably for any children outside of the US and therefore yet to get their eyes in. The original's three lives have been raised to five, too. With two shooters on point, the game switches to a versus setup as each tries to prove themselves the greater marksman. There's no release date yet, but the game appears to be location test ready.

# My Favourite Game
# Tony Hawk

A skateboarding icon recalls video editing on Amigas, and how
Super Mario 64 opened his eyes to an opportunity for his sport

S kateboarding is a time-consuming, nigh-on masochistic pursuit. Every successful trick is born from hundreds of failures, and its best are often fuelled by obsessive devotion. But for **Tony Hawk**, being one of the world's most enduringly successful skateboarders has left time for other pursuits; time he came to put into Activision's long-running skating series, which bears his name to this day.

**Did life as an emerging pro skater in the early '80s leave time for games?**
Yes. My introduction to videogames was *Pac-Man*, and I liked it. But when I discovered *Missile Command*, that's when I got really sucked into arcades. From there I got a ColecoVision. Or was it an Intellivision? It was an Intellivision. My dad got the Intellivision because it was cheaper. Then I learned to appreciate computers. My transition from playing videogames to getting into computers was *Marble Madness*. I got an Amiga based on the fact that you could play *Marble Madness* on it.

**And your affection for games spawned a love for computing more broadly?**
That was it – that gateway opened up the world of computing to me, to home video and nonlinear video editing, and to Video Toaster. That really sent me into a whole new world of technology. But I was playing games all along too.

**Across every platform, what would you pick as your favourite game?**
If I would pick one from my own series, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* was the catalyst for having a game franchise,

**THE EARLY BIRD**
Videogames and skateboarding grew up together, and Tony Hawk knows both well. Nicknamed 'The Birdman' for his ability to soar above looming vert ramps, he is the sport's avuncular ambassador. Hawk made skateboarding his profession aged just 14, dominating competitions for years. But, as he'll tell you, he met true fame when he gave his name and insights to Neversoft's 1999 *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. Since then, he's overseen 18 games in the series, which dropped the '*Pro Skater*' in 2002. With that change, some would argue, so went the series' purity. At 47, Hawk still skates and he's still guiding his game series, the newest of which returns to the *Pro Skater* name.

and establishing a genre of skateboarding videogames. That was a very important entry in the series. The soundtrack was stellar and the gameplay was everything *THPS1* should have been.

**And how about outside of the games you've been involved in?**
Picking a game from all through the years? That's difficult. Probably *Super Mario 64*. That really introduced me to the potential of 3D games. I thought *Mario 64* was brilliant. Jumping into paintings? All the different challenges? I was stuck there immediately.

**Is it fair to say *Super Mario 64* had an influence on the *Tony Hawk* games?**
Yes, that was a great introduction to that type of 3D motion in games. I didn't play *Doom* or the other firstperson shooters when I was growing up. Well, I was already grown up, I guess. Anyway, *Mario 64* showed me that you could make something 3D that was fun and that wasn't just about shooting things.

**You've just seen off *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5*. What was the approach to the game's direction?**
Obviously, we're going back to roots, as the *THPS* title suggests. We wanted that kind of gameplay, and to recapture the control scheme, the challenges and the big-scoring trick combos. But bringing a new online element to it is something to make it more relevant to today's culture.

"I thought Mario 64 was brilliant. All the different challenges? I was stuck there immediately"

**How have you been involved in *THPS5*?**
Previously my role had been about being authentic to skating, and keeping the roster, tricks and locations more true to what skaters would expect. That remains part of my job, but this time it has been more about being true to the original series, and to keep it authentic. And that's because I am one of the only ones working on the game that worked on the original series.

**The series has been with you a long time. How important are those games to your experience of skateboarding?**
It changed my life significantly in terms of my recognition factor, and income and opportunities. But in terms of being a skateboarder I feel it opened up an audience to skateboarding that maybe would've never recognised it before. It inspired some people to start [skating], and I think it inspired an appreciation from others.

**And why return to that early era of the series' history?**
There had been a lot of chatter through the years about the fans wanting a *THPS* title. And it seemed like so many were going back to the original two games, and people were buying PlayStations just so they could play them. I felt like it was a request for the feel of [the *Pro Skater*] series. I had been pushing Activision for years to do that kind of thing. *THPS HD* was a step in that direction, but I knew there was something more to it. ◼

Dale May

### WEBSITE
**Flyer Fever**
www.flyerfever.com

Flyer Fever took up the mantle from The Arcade Flyer Archive (TAFA) last year, and since then owner Dan Hower has been methodically uploading examples from his huge arcade flyer collection. The site allows you to browse over 3,300 commercial flyers for coin-op cabs dating from 1971 up to the early '90s. Every flyer is presented as a hi-res scan (along with another of the reverse where applicable), and each one is tagged and cross-referenced to make searching easier. Simply scrolling through the archive is hypnotic, however, as you encounter glossy American efforts from the '70s, exuberant Japanese oddities, and perfunctory, zine-esque black-ink-on-yellow-paper prints. It would be good to get some contextualising text to go with the images, but the collection has a stark appeal without it.
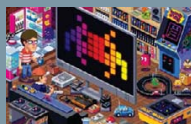
### ART
**Edge Retro cover revival**
tinyurl.com/edgeret

Twelve years ago, Gary Lucken was dabbling in pixel art as a hobby, posting his doodlings on **Edge**'s discussion forum. When we asked him if he'd like to have a run at illustrating the cover of our first Retro special edition, he couldn't refuse – and turned it into a new career dedicated to building things out of tiny blocks. Since then, he's contributed to **Edge** on many more occasions, worked for the likes of the BBC, DHL and GQ, and created visuals for games including *Scram Kitty And His Buddy On Rails*. This month, he decided to 'remaster' his very first **Edge** work, and the result is an eye-poppingly vivid treat.

### WEB GAME
**Fear Me**
www.bit.ly/fearmegame

At first glance, *Fear Me*'s gridded play area and boxy visuals call to mind Michael Brough's *868-Hack*. Nikola Vlahovic's Ludum Dare effort is, in fact, a ten-level puzzle game that casts you as a cheerful ghost in the business of frightening children. You scare kids simply by floating into their vicinity, and you're able to pass through solid walls of any thickness by hitting Space (though once committed, you have to wait until you pop out of the other end to regain control). It would be simple were it not for the kids' pesky habit of hitting the lightswitch – the merest whiff of photons, it turns out, will bring your haunting to an end. *Fear Me*'s clever blend of spatial puzzling and twitch-based play makes for an enjoyable ten levels, but we found ourselves mourning a life cut short at the end.

# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

### CONSOLE
**Retro VGS**
www.retrovgs.com

There can't be many bolder ways to tempt fate than to style your new console on Atari's Jaguar. The infamous flop holds a certain cachet, amassed from a brief wave of hype that washed up a Jeff Minter classic and a decent version of *Doom*, but it's hardly a poster child for commercial success. The team behind the $349 Retro VGS console hasn't been deterred by the project's failure to raise $1.95 million on Indiegogo, however, and is pressing ahead with the creation of a working prototype and plans for another round of crowdfunding. If you're in the market for an ultra-specialist system, a nostalgia-driven cart-based console at a PS4 price seems like it was made to order.

### continue

**Virtual funds**
Just $100 buys you entry into Samsung's GearVR dream

**Trico of the light**
The cat-bird's TGS stand was terrifying (but cute)

**Donkey conga**
Two world records in a day as Copeland and Lakeman's battle rages

**Computer music**
Sadism, longing and autotune – it can only be a new GLaDOS song

### quit

**Phone bill**
GearVR obviously needs a Samsung phone, so we'll hold on for Rift

**Dataminers**
Stop spoiling surprises, you joyless tinkerers

**Put to sleep**
Krillbyte's VR version of *Among The Sleep* takes a dirt nap

**Talk show on mute**
Voice actors' guild gives strike action nod. Devs, please talk them down

### TWEETS

Nothing like finding a bunch of quotes attributed to me with the gender "he" on game sites. I must be a dude if I'm a designer, right?
**Alli Thresher** @AlliThrasher
Designer, *Rock Band 4*

@BBCNews FIFA corruption has been going on for years. My brother used to unplug my controller mid-game. I'm ready to testify. DM me
**Sean Murray** @NoMansSky
Founder, Hello Games

If there's any piece of authorial intent you take away from my work, it's this: "Don't trust anyone to make decisions for you."
**Ken Levine** @IGLevine
Creator, *BioShock*

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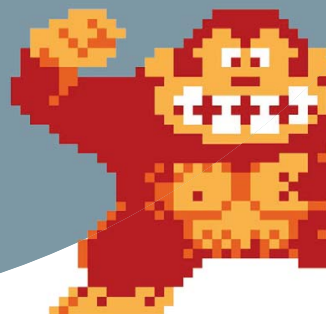
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# GUITAR HERO LIVE

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PS4

# DISPATCHES
# DECEMBER

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store

## Ramble on

As I am preparing to leave the UK for at least a few years (fortunately to a place where it is still possible to buy **Edge**), my life has been rather busy lately. Because I've been running around like a headless chicken in the real world for the past few weeks, my carefully ring-fenced gaming time has been even more critical to my sanity than usual. So when I read Przemek Marszal saying in **E**279 that "games do not need to offer escapism", I beg to differ. It is of course a matter of definition, and I think what he meant was that they do not need to let us flee the harsh realities of the real world and take us to La La Land. But if escapism is a taste (or need) for spending time in a rich imaginary universe that distracts us from the all-too-often meaningless chores of our daily lives, then I'd say that it is still games' chief appeal, at least for me.

It is the type of escapism that is, perhaps, changing. There was a time when all games had to have one quality: they needed to be exciting, putting us in the shoes of space pilots, combatants, racing drivers, and so on. This is arguably still true of most genres (I'm talking about you, FPS) and major franchises today, but a strong underground movement challenging this view is slowly becoming mainstream.

*Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* is the perfect example. Here is a game that looks absolutely fantastic, is as engaging and immersive as any title I've played recently, and yet is the very opposite of exciting. I mean, anyone who gets an adrenaline rush wandering about in a postcard English countryside village listening to ghostly conversations between the local priest and his flock needs to have their head examined! And it's not the only recent game of its kind: this sort of almost contemplative experience is arguably also at the heart of

*The Long Dark*. And for all its reported gameplay shortcomings (I chose not to buy it after reading **E**284's review, so haven't played it), *Submerged* at least deserves credit for daring to proudly proclaim itself a "combat-free" exploration game.

I believe this goes far beyond the old debate about what constitutes a 'non-game'. As the entertainment media matures alongside its audience comes the need for experiences that are more subtle and multifaceted than being the strongest or fastest kid in the schoolyard. Nothing wrong with occasionally indulging in these primitive emotions, of course (I bought *Forza 6* on release day in order to get high on pure speed), but I'm old enough to realise they're not the only ones worth having. I have little doubt that, as I'm settling down in a more arid landscape, I will spend quiet hours in Yaughton, fondly reminiscing about England's green and pleasant land.
**Fabrice Saffre**

Happy trails, Fabrice. It seems that you've already got this covered, but if not — ahem — an affordable overseas subscription would be the perfect option for your time away.

## Celebration day

I recently returned to the UK after three or so years in New Zealand. I was a little disappointed that my family wasn't able to meet me at the airport, but it didn't matter. She would be there.

And she was, exactly where we said we'd meet, in WH Smiths. Sat on a shelf, calling to me... **Edge** 283.

She was still as gorgeous as I remember, and had all the features one could want. Great reviews, interesting articles, and the only letters page in publishing history that doesn't make me want to gnaw my own arm off, just for something less painful to do.

> "She would be there. And she was, exactly where we said we'd meet, in WH Smiths"

**EDGE**

It was a joyous reunion. I've been reading **Edge** on and off since I was in school and was excited for the Dreamcast launch. (Remember the 'Sega is dead' issue?) I was a subscriber from university until I left for New Zealand.

In the meantime I've bought and read, cover to cover, **Edge** 284 (which came out just days after I bought 283) and 285. Once I've got a more permanent address, I'll be subscribing again.

It's great to be back, **Edge**. You don't look a day over 247.
**Adam Neather**

You know that — ahem — a very affordable overseas subscription would've been perfect for your time away, right? But then we wouldn't have had this reunion. Look, just shut up and come over and give us a hug.

## In my time of dying

The gradual progression and (re)emergence of narrative in games, particularly in adventure games through the likes of Telltale productions, got me thinking about difficulty, and how it might be a significant barrier to entry.

In some games the level of difficulty is absolutely intrinsic to the gameplay; it's an essential part of the experience and without it, the game mechanics would break. Games such as *Super Meat Boy*, *Ikaruga* and *DayZ* come to mind. In other games, particularly shooters and action games, most include the option to tinker with the difficulty level, but generally I don't think they go far enough. They change enemy AI, health pickups and mission objectives, but what I think is needed is something a bit more radical — something that alters the game mechanics and changes the way that the game is made easier. An over-simplified version of this is evident in *New Super Mario Bros U*, where after a certain amount of attempts you're basically guided through the level on autopilot in certain sections, bypassing the hard parts.

Lots of people have less time to play nowadays. Data shows that a large percentage of players don't complete their games, and with family, jobs and other commitments, fun per minute is getting squeezed. Fewer people have the time or inclination to invest multiple hours into teeth-gnashingly difficult, hair-pulling levels any more. More mainstream players with varying levels of ability are participating in games today, and a big barrier to immersion and interactivity is difficulty level. The success of adventure games is evidence of that (along with great writing, design and voice acting, of course).

So what's the solution? I propose a 'narrative' mode that minimises complex controls, allows auto-aiming, and guides the player. It would turn *The Last Of Us* into more of an adventure game in the traditional point-and-click sense, like *The Walking Dead*, where the player performs the basic inputs and command-sensitive prompts without worrying about circle strafing or weapon customisation. This undoubtedly wouldn't work for a lot of games. But for those where tweaks and adjustments work well, it could potentially open experiences such as *Dead Space*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Dishonored* to an audience of those previously intrigued by trailers and story but put off by complex entry requirements.
**Ahmed Wobi**

OK, but only if it goes both ways. We want an always-online, open-world *Kentucky Route Zero* with boss rushes and pixel-perfect platforming sections. Thinking about it, if we did it your way we might get past stage four of *Ikaruga* at last. Hmm.

## Your time is gonna come

I've grown up with computers, from programming on a rubber-keyed Spectrum to installing my first 3D accelerator card at the dawn of the GPU age. It prepared me for adulthood where I'm happily nestled into the IT industry. Growing up with computers

meant I grew up a gamer, but it hasn't prepared me quite so well as a person.

For example, while contemplating a purchase the other day I noted a disturbing lack of available funds displayed at the periphery of my vision — most off-putting, flying right in the face of something gaming has led me to expect for not just years but decades. Maybe Microsoft's HoloLens will rectify this, although I'll probably need to talk to my employer about paying me at 60-second intervals — its current monthly setup wouldn't give me the feedback frequency I require.

Speaking of which, it's about time that my progress was tracked via a personal profile interface. I want to spend experiences points to unlock new specialities and career opportunities.

I have to replace the roof on my conservatory as well. I should be able to access a build menu showing the options available to me based on my funding and progress along a housing technology tree. It should then be automatically constructed with the only possible requirement being a free construction worker. Alas, no, nothing of the sort exists, so the hunt for a tradesman begins.

I did, however, read that houses and apartment buildings have been 3D-printed recently. This gives me hope! Perhaps in time I'll have some repurposed Roombas gathering resources (updating my HoloLens totals), and then another will arrive to 3D-print the walk-in wardrobe my wife wants.

So maybe it's not the case that games haven't prepared me for adulthood. Maybe I just need to be a bit more patient and get some more practice in.
**James Bowman**

Perhaps you just need to set your sights a little lower. Did we ever tell you the one about the friend who dragon-punched a seagull? You could go out and do that right now. It'd help pass the time while you wait for your New 3DS XL to arrive, at least. ■

## STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

On the one hand, it's a cheering sign of the times that the BBC's Make It Digital season this autumn ran two high-profile programmes about videogames: one a feature-length drama, and one a documentary in the prestigious Horizon strand. On the other, it's a melancholy sign of the times that both were about the mouldy canard of whether games cause violence.

The Gamechangers was an expensive drama starring someone who used to be Harry Potter and was now pretending to be Sam Houser, head of Rockstar Games. It was set in the era of *Vice City* and the *San Andreas* Hot Coffee controversy, and also starred Bill Paxton as Jack Thompson, who filed a class-action lawsuit after the teenager Devin Moore shot three cops and, in his legal defence, claimed PTSD and a "dissociative state" after obsessive playing of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*.

There were some incidental details to enjoy: I liked Houser's line about how he wanted videogames where, "You don't have to become a penguin, or some shitty hairy elf." But the script was condescending to everybody concerned. Houser was portrayed as paranoid and petulant, much was mockingly made of Thompson's Christianity and Anglophobia ("It's a disgusting picture of America made by some Brits"), and we saw the killer Moore do literally nothing except shoot cops in *Vice City* before he actually shot cops for real. (His mother was smoking a cigarette as he played, unmistakably implying an abusive family background.)

Formally, then, the film affirmed the story that *GTA* had caused Moore to murder: what's more, his real-life actions were shot in a thirdperson videogame viewpoint before the camera pulled back and up to become a chase-cam as Moore drove off in a squad car. Less rhetorically partisan, at least, were other such playful touches: the film finished with aplomb when an annoyed Houser, walking out into the Manhattan streets at night, hijacked a car and drove off as the picture

### Any TV documentary apparently still has to start from scratch in explaining what modern games are like

morphed into mid-'00s console graphics. But by the time a title card popped up to declare "There is still no conclusive evidence that videogames make people violent. The debate continues", it looked disingenuous, for the entire film had endorsed the idea they do.

The Horizon documentary was uneasily subtitled Are Videogames Really That Bad? (Sure, they're bad! But are they *that* bad?) It had the usual mise-en-scène: some fine videogame critics were made to stand awkwardly in a white office; psychologists and neuroscientists were filmed slowly walking down corridors. (Like in an FPS,

geddit?) The programme spent a long time presenting evidence that games increase aggression, before using other experts to deconstruct that evidence to conclude that they don't. The programme then pulled the same trick a second time, mooting the idea of gaming "addiction" and then saying that it's not that bad for most people. Only in the last third was there interesting, positive information on how playing games causes growth in the brain areas associated with visuospatial coordination, strategic planning, and fine motor control, and that they can help older people improve their attention span and working memory. Perhaps one day, *Neuroracer* designer Adam Gazzaley nicely suggested, a videogame might be prescribed by a doctor as "a therapy, a digital medicine".

Horizon thus showed all too clearly the limits of what can be done in mainstream TV at the moment. Any documentary apparently still has to start from scratch in explaining what modern games are like, presumably because commissioners assume the audience is as out of touch as they are. But once you've done that, and then spent most of the rest of the programme refuting myths, there's not much time left to say anything very interesting. You certainly can't try to defend videogame violence for its artistry. No one was invited to point out that the US cable series Hannibal, for instance, is far more violent than any game ever made, yet has had the mainstream critics fawning over it for its baroque, highly aestheticised murder scenes.

Perhaps, at least, the programme will have been a public service to that tiny segment of the population that has never played games and gleans all it knows about them from Daily Mail headlines. Licence-fee money well spent, no doubt. Me, I switched over from iPlayer and decided to creep up to the top of an outpost in Afghanistan at night, where I gleefully killed all the guards with mortar fire before they ever saw me. It was beautiful.

### IAN BOGOST

# Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

Videogames have a strange relationship with time, repetition and value. For one part, players gripe endlessly when a game is too short. Imagine, for example, paying £14.99 for a game such as *Gone Home* that you can finish in an hour — and that resists replay. What a waste!

But then players also eat up endless sequels. *Gears Of War* is apparently old enough that its new sequel can be classified as a reboot, while *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* is the saga's fifth entry in name only. Nobody tires of these, nor all the *Batman: Arkham Whatevers*. Of course, a sequel is always a different and ostensibly new game, except also it isn't. It's a return, a repetition with variation.

Then there are re-releases. Console cycles offer excuses for these clever workarounds, a popular late-gen game on the console just rendered 'old' finding justification for a remastered edition on the new one. *The Last Of Us* enjoyed this treatment, for example. Capcom's survival-horror classic *Resident Evil* has been re-released too many times to count since it originally appeared in 1996.

Re-releases have their place, of course, and it's a place fashioned pretty much directly out of the planned obsolescence created by console generations and operating system upgrades — conditions that ensure new audiences have to pay to play older games. Backward compatibility is said to be too difficult to support (that is, costly), or unique hardware makes it prohibitive. And in truth, the same forcing functions push us to re-purchase other media, such as movies, for DVD, then Blu-ray, then iTunes, and so on.

But there's something different about games, where re-release is often portrayed as novelty. A while back, I was anxiously awaiting delivery of the latest *Animal Crossing* title, *Happy Home Designer*. Even the hardware created a superfluous re-release itch in need of scratching, and I am both proud and ashamed to admit that I was lured into acquiring the special-edition Nintendo

*Maybe it's time to drop the pretence: we like our games basically identical to their predecessors*

3DS XL reskinned with villager Isabelle, even though I already own a working 3DS XL.

Questions wafted through the house as we awaited delivery. "I wonder if anything in the game is going to be different?" my daughter mused. The hope was yes, I guess, but with an unspoken ellipsis: ...isn't it the sameness that makes one *Animal Crossing* game as appealing as the last? After all, this is a game about literally doing the same thing play session after play session. Any time something's changed in *Animal Crossing*, it's only seemed to change for the worse. Remember the terrible city in *Animal Crossing: City Folk*? Or the stupid, pointless island in *New Leaf*? Who needs these excesses, seemingly added only to tick the box of novelty?

To some extent, when we play games we want comfort and familiarity rather than novelty, even though our mouths and typing fingers say that we want novelty. Games are apparatuses as much as they are media experiences, and much of what we want from apparatuses is increasingly refined operation. For example, the 2007 smartphone whose cellular tower triangulation method for geolocation is replaced in 2009 with one that uses GPS. In *Happy Home Designer*, the nuisance of pushing and pulling furniture around your village hut is replaced by a saner and more efficient drag-and-drop decorating mechanism. But this too quickly reveals itself to be as unwelcome as the city or the island: the point of *Animal Crossing* is slowness and labour, and coupling that labour to the little avatar you control in the game.

Many teeth have been gnashed over the relative virtues of computer games as a kind of game versus folk games and table games and other more ancient renditions of the form. Go and chess and backgammon are thousands of years old, unchanged and unchanging, and yet they remain appealing nevertheless — even because of — this sameness. But these arguments also often rely on appeals to mechanical emergence. Go is mathematically enormous, and no human could plumb its depths in a lifetime.

Infinity is appealing, but computer games rarely tousle its hair. Instead, they tend to prefer the more ordinary sort of repetition: the kind that entails doing the same thing over and over again. Maybe it's time to drop the pretence: we like our games basically identical to their predecessors. There's no shame in this. What other media embraces sameness with such resilience? So go ahead, play your sequel or reboot with abandon.

*Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning* A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*
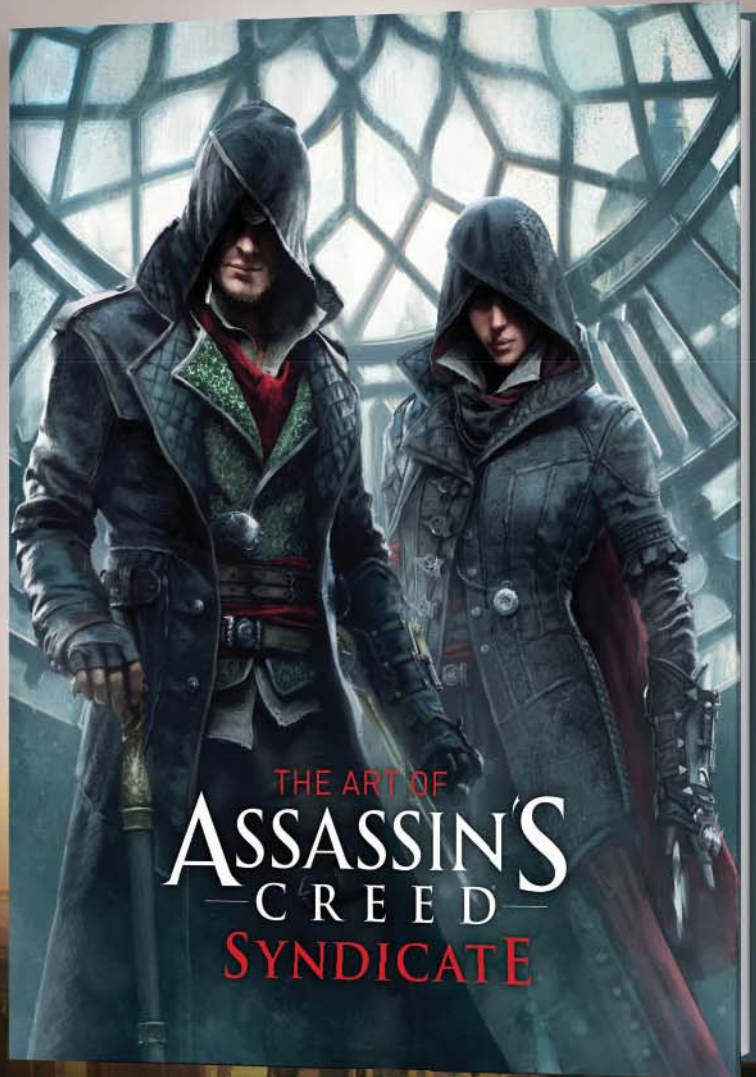
**NATHAN BROWN**

# Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

My *Street Fighter IV* win record on Xbox Live is a shade above 50 per cent. A large number of my losses follow a similar pattern: I take the first round comfortably, start the second well, decide I'm the better player and resolve to finish the match with a flourish. In my desperation to send an opponent packing with some tricksy combo or other I fail to notice as my health bar slips away – until it's too late, at which point panic sets in, the fingers stop following the orders of the brain, everything falls apart and I lose first the round, and then the whole match. Despondent, I will ponder what I'm doing with my life for precisely as long as it takes for the matchmaking menu to load, then I jump straight back in, learning nothing from a mistake I have already made a thousand times.

The problem, you see, is that I am obsessed with the notion of playing games *properly*. Not as their designers intended, or in accordance with accepted best practice, but what *I* think is the correct way to play them. In *Street Fighter*, I would rather be Arsenal than Chelsea; I would prefer to play with style, and lose, than win by boring my opponent off the pitch, my failure a little easier to stomach from my seat on my lonely, imagined moral high ground. This, I suspect, is why 25-odd years ago I became a Ken player, not a Ryu. I am the blond, flamboyant, style-obsessed loser: the magnificent pink cowboy, the eternal runner-up. I will never top the Xbox Live leaderboard; they will never put me front and centre on the box. It's probably for the best.

I don't get to play *Street Fighter* that much any more, partly because of the baby-waking sound of an arcade stick, but mostly because *Street Fighter* isn't *Destiny*. But that same ethos – that insistence on playing in a certain, Nathan-proper way – is as important when my pretend spaceman is shooting aliens as when my pretend martial artist is trying to set up that EX Tatsu juggle combo on a D-rank Zangief. But while it's to

Games are as much about the losses as the wins, the failures of the former strengthening the magic of the latter

the detriment of my win/loss record in *Street Fighter*, in *Destiny* it's an asset.

What I like most about *Street Fighter* is its skill ceiling. There's always a setup or combo that's just out of my technical reach – something I can hit ten or 20 per cent of the time in training mode, but that feels like magic when you land it. If I just played it safe every time, I might have a better win record, but I'd have had far less fun along the way.

The new *Destiny* expansion, *The Taken King*, adds an item that boosts the chance of a boss fight yielding an exotic – the rarest, most powerful class of weapons and armour

in the game. The minute the Three Of Coins appeared, players set to work on finding the most efficient way to abuse it. They found a story mission with a checkpoint right before the boss fight. You'd spawn, pop a coin, snipe the boss to low health, then run up to him and fire a rocket at your feet, killing both of you. You respawn just outside and any loot drop would be there waiting for you.

OK, so you've got a dozen of the most powerful bits of gear in the game in less than an hour, but what happens next? Hours of play levelling them all up, and any future drops of a similar rarity likely to be duplicates of what you've already got. A lot of this is Bungie's fault – not just for inventing Three Of Coins, but for making a game that, in its early days, was so tight-fisted with its best gear that it has coached a section of its playerbase into breaking its rules wherever possible. But to me, it raises a simple question: why do we play games?

Game designer Dave Sirlin once wrote a guide to competitive videogames, *Playing To Win*, in which he argues that if a repetitive tactic works on an opponent, you have no reason to change your ways until your foe shows you it's no longer going to work. That, no doubt, is the path to an 80-per-cent *Street Fighter IV* win record and a *Destiny* vault full of superweapons, but it sounds like a long, boring road to madness. Instead, I'll carry on failing to hit those delicious combos nine times out of ten. I'll keep shooting at the boss with my weedy pulse rifle, hoping to see an exotic's yellow glow when the fight is over. Because I believe games are as much about the losses as they are the wins, the failures of the former strengthening the magic of the latter. Sirlin can stick his repetitive path to the podium. The *Destiny* breakers can shove their little exploits. I'll keep on failing with a smile, consoling myself with the knowledge that success, should it ever come, will be all the sweeter.

Nathan Brown *is* **Edge***'s deputy editor. He types blindfolded, because he believes it is mpre fyn*

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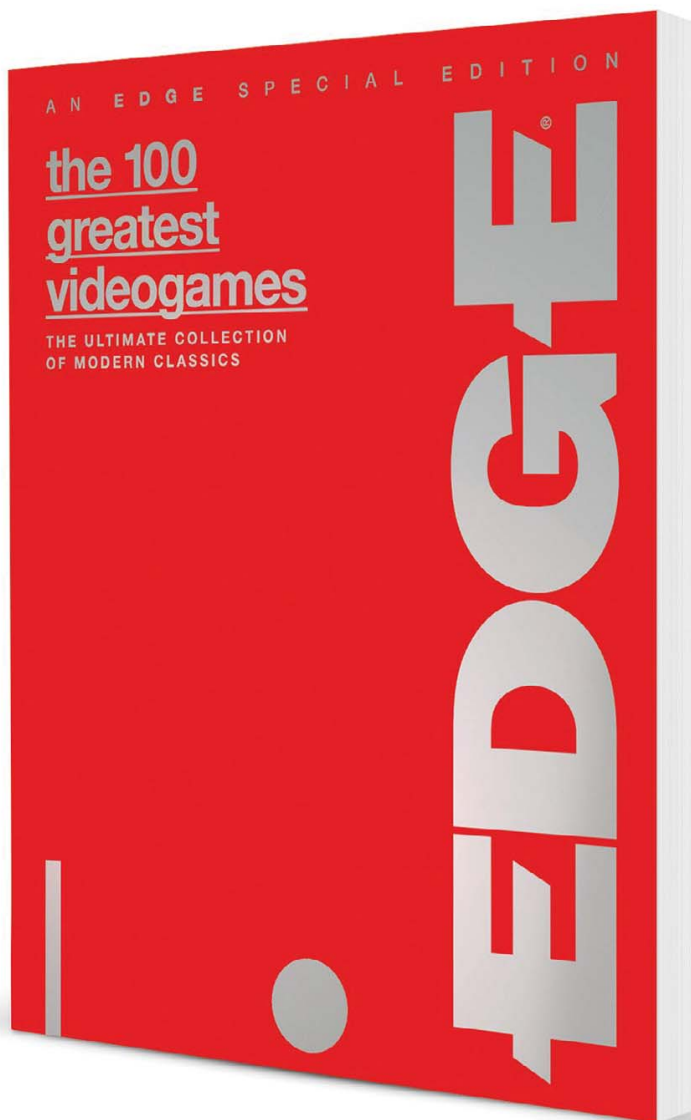
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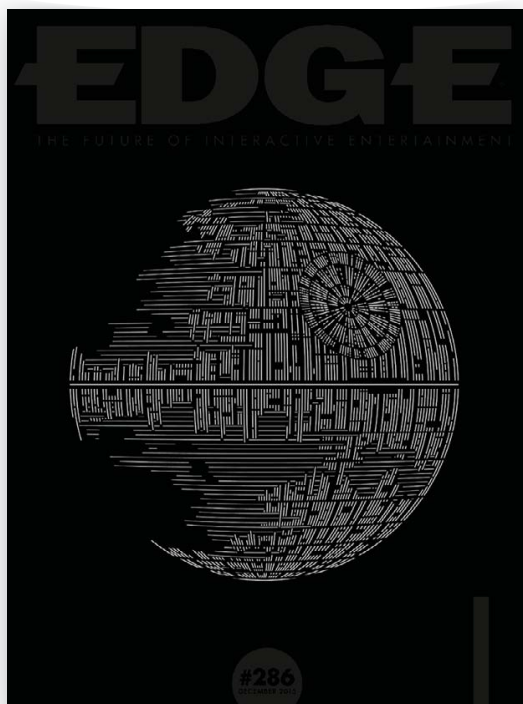
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# H Y P E

## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

**Explore the iPad
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extra Hype content**

# East is east

It wasn't so long ago that the Japanese game industry's survival was being pinned on its willingness to absorb the ideas of western developers. There's still clear evidence of those leanings today, as seen in two of this month's Hype entries. *Dragon Quest Builders* (p56) was revealed to a barely contained sense of disbelief – the fact that Square Enix has joined the wave of *Infiniminer*- and *Minecraft*-inspired block-building games is almost as surprising as the fact that it chose the *Dragon Quest* series as the platform on which to do it. In truth, Square Enix has crafted something with its own clearly delineated ideas on player creation, but the inspiration is clear.

And *Umbrella Corps* (p58), though inspired by a love of bruise-inducing Airsoft sessions, looks to *Rainbow Six* and *Counter-Strike* to administer a shot in the *Resident Evil* juggernaut's increasing number of arms. In it, methodical, cover-based teamplay within chokepoint-riddled environments clatters into swarms of the undead and, inevitably, the opposing team's bullets.

But there are just as many Japanese developers doubling down on their region's distinctive characteristics. Not least FromSoftware, which among other projects is working on a new chapter for the not-exactly-unpopular *Bloodborne*. *The Old Hunters* (p54) is a return trip that promises an even sterner dressing-down for cavalier players. Then there's *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (p46), which offers up big swords, even bigger mechs, and a population of colossal indigenous monsters.

Whichever approach a studio chooses, it's clear that Japan's game industry is still alive and kicking – and our report from this year's Tokyo Game Show (p80) further underscores that fact. But it's telling that for all the fearmongering that accompanied grim predictions of an industry in decline, and the insistence that western development ideas were Japan's only saviour, this issue's most exciting Japanese prospects, *The Old Hunters* and *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, choose to eschew them.

## MOST WANTED

**Burnout successor** TBA
Criterion co-founders Alex Ward and Fiona Sperry's new studio, Three Fields Entertainment, has revealed a spiritual successor to *Burnout* is in the works. It emphasises speed, traffic and "lots and lots of crashing". We're renewing our insurance policies in preparation.

**Far Cry Primal** PC
*Far Cry Primal* boldly dispenses with the series' usual guns and vehicles, instead casting the player as the last surviving member of a Mesolithic tribe. Surviving at the bottom of the food chain should make for an invigorating spin on *Far Cry*'s usual bullet-rich stealth action.

**Halo 5** Xbox One
What we've seen of the campaign so far seems a little bombastic, but 343 Industries' significantly expanded take on Forge – which includes revised controls, a free camera and a powerful object-grouping tool – promises to make level creation a quick and painless endeavour.

# XCOM 2

Rebuilding the first, last and only line of
defence against the scum of the universe

| | |
|---:|:---|
| **Publisher** | 2K |
| **Developer** | Firaxis |
| **Format** | PC |
| **Origin** | US |
| **Release** | February 5 |

Given the chance, *XCOM 2* lead designer **Jake Solomon** would eat steak every night. Not just any steak, mind, but a rare ribeye with mash and a glass of red wine. Of course he doesn't, but as the mockingly self-proclaimed "King XCOM", he does have to be able to palate the same thing over and over, noting subtle differences and remixing his game accordingly. So it's perhaps only natural that as well as orchestrating this turn-based strategy sequel's marquee setting shift from 2015 planetary defence mission to 2035 underground resistance movement, he and his team have put a lot of effort into imbuing *XCOM 2* with a fresh dynamism, a tang of novelty every time you play.

**It's why mission** maps are procedurally generated now and the occupying alien forces on them can drop loot, perhaps yielding accuracy-boosting sights or auto-loader devices, which grant free reloads so you don't lose turns to switching mags. It's why regional bonuses for developing territories are dished out randomly from a pool, no longer fixed to set continents in the returning holographic Geoscape. And it's why your experimental ammo research disgorges one option from a roulette wheel of laterally balanced shell types, rather than follow the same progression of expensive technological leaps as guns.

That randomness, however, does come with potential problems. "*XCOM* is dynamic," Solomon says, "and that's great. This is a replayable game; it needs to be unpredictable. Of course, the more unpredictable it is, then sure, you can achieve peaks — 'Wow, this crazy thing happened that's never happened before' — but every time you introduce a peak, you're also introducing a potential valley. If you hold on tightly you can say, 'No, we've got this very smooth curve of challenge.' If you let go of the reins, the good is that the player has this unpredictable stuff. The bad is, 'Whoah! I didn't expect the player experience to go in that direction.'" Put this way, the late slip from a premium November release slot to February to buy the team extra time to polish suddenly makes a great deal more sense.

It also represents a lot of different considerations to absorb, even before you digest the pressures of the new top-level strategy layer, which asks you to forge links between a rag-tag network of guerrilla cells. You do this from an airship base called the Avenger, a craft being hunted across the unfriendly skies of a globe you no longer control, rationing out your time and Intel resources between supply drops, chasing down rumours and connecting humans sympathetic to your cause. This replaces managing *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*'s global ▶

**Jake Solomon, lead
designer, Firaxis**

ABOVE **The events and tech advances of expansion pack *Enemy Within* never happened in this timeline, but MECs are back on the side of the Advent forces.** LEFT **Muton Berserkers were always terrifying, but are made doubly so now that you can't afford to hunker behind cover indefinitely. "That tension of the player having to take risks is good," Solomon says, "because without it the best way to play *XCOM* is very, very conservatively. If there is no pressure on the player, then, honestly, the best way to play the game is the most boring way to play"**

ABOVE **The inner cities are intentionally sterile, but Firaxis's focus on supporting modders means they needn't stay that way. Players are being given access to the editor used to make the base game's map parcels, allowing us to remix, reshuffle and add to the pool of level furniture.**

TOP RIGHT **The aliens' forces have expanded, but they have also evolved into deadlier forms. Sectoids' psionics, for instance, can now reanimate the dead.**

MAIN **Since you're the aggressor, missions begin with a concealment phase, letting you position your squad for a surgical strike.**

BELOW LEFT **Doctor Tygan is a former Advent scientist, taking over from Dr Vahlen as your foremost mind for research. Bradford, however, returns as central officer, albeit now a broken man after 20 years of occupation.**

BELOW RIGHT **The Avenger is a converted alien ship. You'll have to clear rooms of the ETs' junk before you can build new facilities in them**
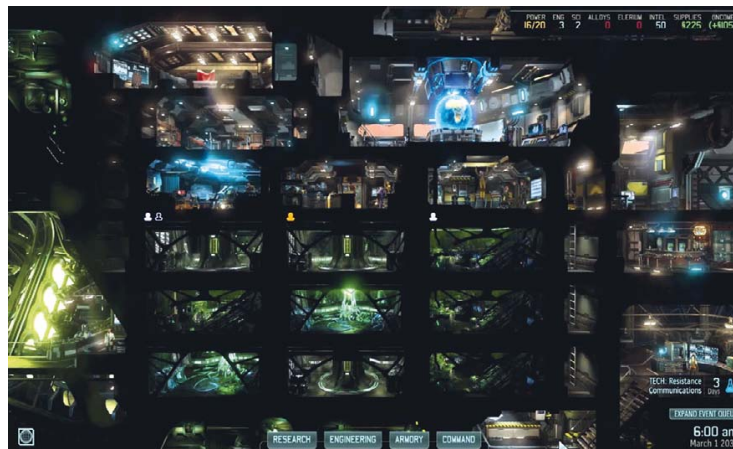
satellite network, but Solomon found that system too unsubtle and wants to eliminate easy paths to victory. "We didn't want to have a satellite system any more," he says, "because that created an issue where we were loading too much onto that system. So that's how you got money and that's also how you reduced panic, and panic was how the aliens won the game. So, well, obviously you should build as many satellites as you can."

**You may not** have to juggle fabricating satellites and plasma rifles any more, but make no mistake: if anything, *XCOM 2* is looking like an even more fraught balancing act than its predecessor. Too fraught at first, in fact. "One of the things that's surprised me, design-wise, is how difficult it is to balance a sequel," Solomon says. "After my first pass at balance, QA immediately [flagged a] top-priority bug: the game's impossible. And I'm like, 'What?! This is Normal difficulty.' 'No, it's not. The game's impossible.'"

It's an exchange that shines a light on the inherent problem in balancing the desire to create a challenge for a returning fanbase with the needs of rank newcomers. Solomon seems to have taken the lesson to heart, developing an ethos for *XCOM 2*'s difficulty settings. "In Normal, I really want players to be able to stumble, pick themselves back up and go," he says. "On the difficulty level above that, it's sort of, 'OK, your margin for making mistakes is now very thin. You *must* understand the systems and how they work.'"

You're certainly facing a lot more potential consequences. In *Enemy Unknown*, all you had to manage to stay in the game was global panic levels (much easier said than done), but your inscrutable aggressors are going to be a lot more active this time around. Part of that is manifest in the Dark Events system: at intervals, you'll be given advanced warning of some current machinations in progress. The Advent organisation of human collaborators might be constructing advanced armour for its units in the field, may want to clamp down on your supply chain, or a UFO could be being dispatched to track down the Avenger. But not all of the aliens' objectives are as easy to descry: the details of certain Dark Events will be hidden, only revealed if you're willing to

spend the Intel to know precisely what you're facing. And while these short-term goals can be countered by successfully completing an attached mission objective in time, Solomon tells us that the aliens are also simultaneously working towards an overarching win condition that's very different to your own. "You can't just sit there and poke at the aliens because at the same time they're building up this progress, they're building these facilities around the world, which is going to allow them to ultimately win the game."

It's all part of maintaining the series' characteristic tension, despite offering a very different, more centralised strategy wrapper around the series' squad-based combat. Ground wetwork isn't quite as unrecognisably altered, but new soldier classes and a focus on mission objectives beyond clearing out the alien presence have changed its nature too, giving you reasons to keep taking chances.

## "The sword doesn't miss very often, as it should not – it's a freaking sword!"

Perhaps the most enticing trade-off of all is swordplay. While leaving cover in a game with Overwatch mechanics is always dicey (even with the ability to choose the direction of your attack to avoid exposing yourself too much), you don't need to have upgraded your Rangers to wield fusion blades before you see significant returns on the risk. "The Ranger is undoubtedly the new favourite of a lot of people," Solomon says. "Now a lot of times that's because the unit's overpowered, so I continue to turn the knob. But the Ranger is really cool... The sword does a lot of damage, as it should. It doesn't miss very often, as it should not — it's a freaking sword!"

Solomon and co will spend the next three months toying with those dials and playing the game to ensure its procedural surprises delight rather than frustrate. After making *XCOM* games for more than seven years, you'd forgive him for being sick of the same old meal. But Solomon is more than happy to keep stomaching his dream design project. "You have to eat your own cooking, right?" ∎



### Parcel force

*XCOM 2*'s procedural maps are built from 'parcels' – chunks of scenery that can be plugged together. A parcel might be a building or a parking lot, but Firaxis groups them into two kinds: open parcels are outdoors and easy to traverse, while closed variants have interiors and take longer to get around. The team has identified a golden ratio of open to closed, and an ideal map size, but there's plenty of variety within those rules. "So we have these parcel sets, and they don't intermix," Solomon says. "We may say, 'This is going to take place in the city centre,' and so we have hundreds of parcels, built out of thousands of assets, just for city centres. And then we have, 'Oh, now you're going to a small town,' and so we have a different set for those." On top of these are layered variations for snow, desert or temperate zones, ensuring that even if you encounter the same parcel a few times, it's rarely an identical repeat.

# XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X

Mechs, monsters and aliens collide in Wii U's most capacious RPG

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | Nintendo |
| **Developer** | Monolith Soft |
| **Format** | Wii U |
| **Origin** | Japan |
| **Release** | Out now (JP), December 4 |

On the face of it, it feels ridiculous to write that *Xenoblade Chronicles X*'s Primordia region is colossal. After all, what's this JRPG's vast, varied plain next to *Skyrim*'s realm of multifaceted crags, *The Crew*'s sizeable chunk of a real continent, or the promise of functionally infinite worlds made by *No Man's Sky*? But you step out onto the planet Mira's springy green turf for the first time and try telling your eyes that what lies before them isn't stupefyingly huge. If *Ocarina Of Time*'s Hyrule Field used the sheer wonder of nature to make Nintendo fans want to go fetch the horizon in 1998, and Monolith reissued the challenge with Gaur Plain in the original *Xenoblade Chronicles* on Wii, then Primordia makes both put together look like your local cricket pitch.

Yes, the region takes up a lot of floor space but its real tricks are its boggling scale and sense of otherness. As you first emerge from a rocky pass, you're treated to a few postcards: thundering herds of wildlife, white sands beneath towering cliffs, coral-like protrusions and lush verdant turf stretching into the distance. Later, you learn that the 'little' alien wolves (Grex) you saw teased each stand well over a head taller than your puny custom-made avatar. Those brontosauruses with hammerhead shark noggins? Well, they drink from lakes large enough to host boat races.

Not everything simply dwarfs you. Rather, this is a world built in layers: bizarre alien hens with bulbous wattles skittle around freely between the trunk-like legs of slug-faced herbivores nibbling from the treetops. Overhead, towering dome rock formations and wending natural shelves break up the silhouette of the stricken ring city of New LA — your new home — on the horizon. And that's just the starting region, with Noctilum, Sylvalum, Oblivia and Cauldros all marked on our GamePad world map awaiting discovery.

**'Discovery' is the** operative word here. Mira is not just a new world to you, or the series: humanity itself only crash-landed on it two months ago. Or what's left of humanity, anyway. There few surviving homo sapiens after an alien conflict has reduced the Earth to ashes in its crossfire, our race fleeing its husk via ark ships. Yours, the White Whale, after two years on the lam, was finally caught by pursuing forces, but got off lightly, merely being torn up in atmosphere to shower debris and stasis pods across Mira's surface. Those alive and awake have clustered in New LA under the auspices of BLADE (Builders of a new Legacy After the Destruction of Earth), a problem-solving force into which you're quickly drafted to help our species come to terms with life on this hostile new world. ▶

It will take a while to get your own Skell, but when a pilot's licence does arrive, you'll have a whole new set of loot slots to fill. Buying insurance will prevent a costly replacement bill if you manage to get your frame blown up in the meantime

Given its size, that task could easily have felt unmanageable. Still, while it's evident that Mira's been designed to be tackled from the cockpit of a flying, transforming Skell mech, Monolith has smoothed your path in the 30-odd hours before you're granted access to *X*'s signature robotic suits. Some measures are simple: your custom-built avatar can run at Usain Bolt speeds, and bounds like Spider-Man, plus there's an autorun option to save aching thumbs. Others are integrated into the fiction and mechanics: potential fast travel points are everywhere, accessed via a hex-based grid overlay on each area's map. But those out in the field have to be unlocked by burying your pick of FrontierNav probes in spots marked by laser-like beams of red light.

Not all are equal, either — you'll find probes suited to passively mining resources, those that offer buffs in combat, and those that dish out a bonus for finding secret areas — but like-typed units seeded in nearby hexes link them up for an adjacency bonus that multiplies their efficiency. There's evidence of streamlining elsewhere, too, with a centralised Mission Control job board to reduce the time soaked up by trawling the locals for quests, and a Scout Console to join up with other online players into squads of up to 32. Story and affinity mission requirements, meanwhile, can be viewed straight from the GamePad to save pointless return trips to base, despite generally snappy loading times (we presume our demo unit had all the optional data packs installed, which take up some 10GB in total).

**All of this** girth will mean little if it isn't home to a varied cast, a strong story and an enduring battle system. First contact with each, however, is largely promising. Returning from *Xenoblade Chronicles* is its take on realtime combat, your party automatically attacking once a target is engaged. You control one member's orientation and distance from the target while a palette of special abilities, dubbed Battle Arts, charges. The order you deploy them in remains vital and so does facing, with Arts such as the starting Drifter class's Slit Edge doing far more damage when launched from the side or rear. In fact, with the new ability to target specific appendages — slicing off a Grex's tail, say — it can be more

important than ever in a close-fought battle. Timing has changed a little too, with Arts overcharging if you leave them be for long enough, giving a huge bonus to their effect.

The story's early hours, meanwhile, are seeded with dramatic potential. It isn't long before you discover you're not the only interlopers here — a 'xenoform' menace called the Prone have begun to either enslave or eradicate the locals, and would like to do much the same to you. There are heavy hints about power struggles at home, too, when smarmy New LA leader Maurice Chausson elevates himself to director general, a move met with a succession of raised eyebrows.

It's the diverse ensemble cast, however, that earths these story beats, despite also often being larger than life. Lin, for example, is an ebullient young genius who finds a sparring partner in the Tingle-esque Tatsu, a native who quickly proclaims himself a VIP

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## Your custom-built avatar can run at Usain Bolt speeds, and bounds like Spider-Man

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(and gets on her nerves just as fast). Your rescuer and nominal squad leader, Colonel Elma, is an ever-professional solider, while her boss, Commander Vandham, is a rough-spoken ex-mechanic whose coarse speech pairs with a no-nonsense approach. The dull spot is you: Shulk might have been a divisive lead, but your voiceless, gesturing protagonist is an incongruous presence in cutscenes with such strong localisation and voice work.

Six hours, in the context of an adventure lasting 70-plus, isn't long to get to know people, nor to pare back the mysteries of a tale penned by returning writer/director Tetsuya Takahashi. It is, however, enough time to discover that *X* is reviving the wanderlust that drove its predecessor, and to be made to feel very small in the face of a world that may not be colossal by absolute standards, but is large enough to impress on you how many sights and secrets it has left to disclose. Given how rewarding making discoveries was in Takahashi's previous game, we wouldn't have it any other way. ∎



### Knife block
While New LA's residential district is where you can go to chill out or catch up with civilians, your home is in BLADE barracks, situated at the heart of the admin district. As your rank with the organisation climbs, you'll be rewarded with new ways to customise this little mission hub and hangout, rank two bringing a holofigure projector for viewing models. Early on, you're also granted basic control over the decals on the walls (your choice of faction emblem or New LA logo) and their colour (locked at first to shades of grey). It's not exactly Mother Base, but returning is easy with a fast-travel hex right in the centre, and there's an array of affinity missions to collect here, as well as the briefing room from which you launch the early story chapters.

TOP **New LA is divvied up into four districts: industrial, commercial, administrative and residential. Each is large enough to explore in its own right, but you can perform most essential tasks without leaving the admin zone.**
RIGHT **A full party unleashing their Battle Arts at once can be a marvellous spectacle. A common early sight is Elma sliding under the belly of a creature while firing, Skell expert Lin drawing aggro with her vast metal shield, before you topple the beast and fire a flaming grenade into its maw.**
BELOW **Elma tries to reach a diplomatic resolution with the first Prone boss before the fight. This sentient feline isn't Prone, and its race and purpose are still shrouded in mystery, but it doesn't look like talking's going to work out with it, either**
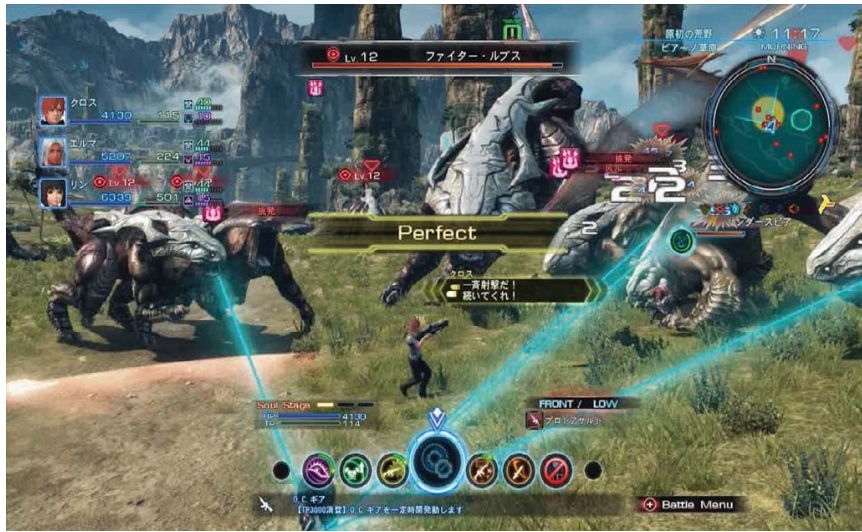






TOP **As was the case with** *Xenoblade Chronicles***' Gaur Plain, you'll encounter pockets of creatures so far beyond you that you don't even register. Watch for high-level beasts with eye icons floating nearby, though – these will attack without provocation should they catch your scent.**
ABOVE **A glimpse of the dustbowl that is Oblivia. You do have the freedom to journey beyond Primordia early on if you wish, so long as you can find the route and survive the journey**

# HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION

Playing at a disadvantage in Dambuster's occupied urban jungle

| | |
|---|---|
| **Publisher** | Deep Silver |
| **Developer** | In-house (Dambuster) |
| **Format** | PC, PS4, Xbox One |
| **Origin** | UK |
| **Release** | 2016 |

The *Homefront* series' luck is notorious. Despite taking a swing at a half-taboo subject and sparking controversy with its marketing, 2011's linear run-and-gun through a USA under hostile occupation met with generally mild reviews and mass indifference. In its wake, developer Kaos was shuttered by THQ; two years later, the publisher also went extinct. Crytek then acquired the rights and envisioned a new game to be developed by Crytek UK and co-published with Deep Silver — a clean break, but one that would retain the challenging subject matter. Crytek's own financial crisis would see what is now *The Revolution* changing hands again, Deep Silver's parent, Koch Media, taking ownership of both the IP and Crytek UK, rebranding the latter Dambuster Studio. After so much misfortune, a superstitious observer might easily conclude that the series was cursed.

**CJ Kershner is** clearly not a superstitious man. After a stint on the original *Homefront,* he embarked on a writing career at Ubisoft Montreal, but he's since moved on to take up the role of senior narrative designer on *The Revolution*. It's a shift some would call risky, but he describes it as a homecoming.

Not that you'd be able to tell from comparing the two games. Calling this loose sequel *The Revolution* feels almost like a proclamation of the lack of continuity. There are no common characters; there's no shared timeline. Even the means by which the Korean occupation occurs has been rewritten. All that remains is the central fantasy that was strong enough to lure Kershner back: what follows defeat, when your armed forces are smashed and your country has been dismantled? For the residents of Philadelphia, US base of the Korean People's Army, it's an excuse to use all those guns lying around.

"The thing that people respond really well to is the premise," Kershner says, "which is the idea of a fallen, occupied America. This isn't another game set in Nowheristan, or on Planet Typhoid, or wherever; this is set in locations that I recognise. I'm not going after any ideal of honour or duty; I'm going to defend my block. That is what I think brings fans of the genre and developers, whether it's Kaos or Dambuster, to the game: the idea of doing proper guerrilla warfare."

For guerrilla warfare to work, the design doc of the original game had to go. *The Revolution* isn't content to shove you down a straight path, but offers freedom of approach in a manner more akin to *Far Cry*. There's a golden thread, as Kershner puts it, which will ensure you hit the main story beats, but for the most part you'll be left to weave your way through a tarmac no man's land, a  ▶

Senior narrative designer CJ Kershner also worked on the original *Homefront*
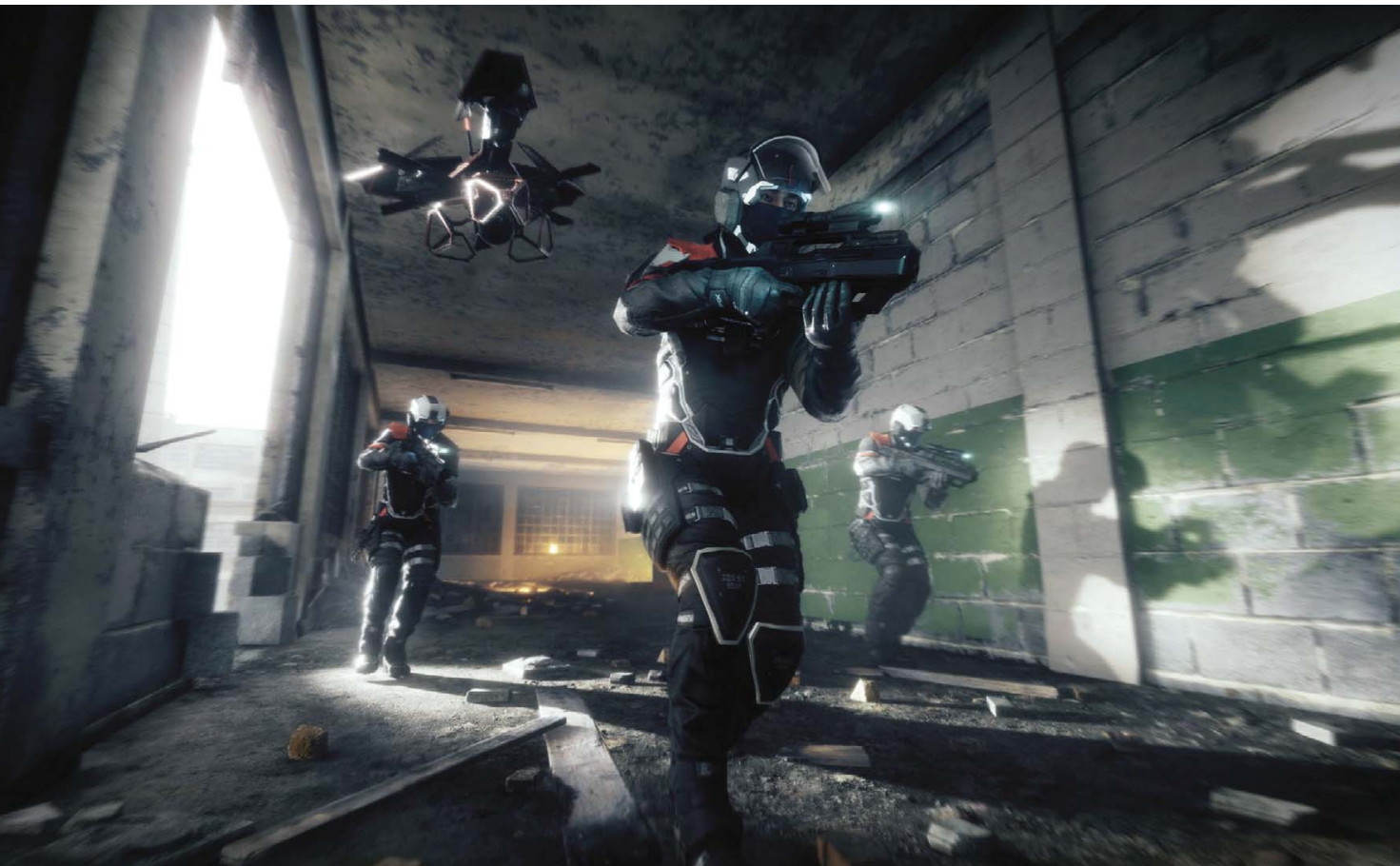
ABOVE **Drones, though weak, can cause all manner of trouble for you by signalling for reinforcements at the first opportunity. They can be hacked via the contents of your guerrilla tool kit (GTK).** LEFT **Most of the resistance fight with what they can cobble together, a neat justification for your ability to pull off the barrel of your rifle mid-fight and turn it into a flamethrower**

ABOVE **The Revolution promises to showcase civilian life under hostile occupation. While resentful of the KPA's presence, the man on the street is a long way from joining you in crusading against it.**
RIGHT **The beam of a scout ship means almost certain death. Unless you can escape it, reinforcements will continue to amass until you've been expunged**

## Fighting Fantasy

The studio's research for *The Revolution* must surely have earned it a place on some sort of watch list. The inspiration for the original *Homefront* was Red Dawn, the 1984 film in which a pack of high-schoolers resist Soviet occupation of the United States, but the reading list for *The Revolution* has been far more eclectic. "I read the Counterinsurgency Field Manual," says Kershner, "which is a US Army doctrine publication – very, very dry; kind of boring. But it was really interesting, for the game's occupation force, to get in the mindset of working with crowd control, and dealing with a civilian population and an insurgency."

place patrolled by an enemy that outmatches you and won't stick to predictable paths. Go in haphazardly, though, and you may come to regret the provocation, given the KPA's proclivity for disproportionate responses.

*The Revolution*'s Red Zones, meanwhile, are designated no-go areas in which Korean forces will shoot all intruders on sight. Get spotted by a drone and it won't be long before troops come running. Find yourself unable to shake a search light and the KPA interpret shock and awe as running you over with a tank. They fight like an army instead of budget night watchmen: reinforcement is the first response to every transgression.

"It's a key part of the guerrilla fantasy," Kershner says. "You never run away in other shooters — you run away constantly in this one. You're a weaker actor coming up against a much, much stronger, more technologically advanced military force."

### "You never run away in other shooters – you run away constantly in this one"

The industrial landscape of the Red Zones practically begs you to flee. It's a warren, a vertiginous maze of steel and concrete that goads you into taking ramps and stairways on your motorbike if doing so will put you just one more block ahead of the enemy front. It's this feeling that Dambuster is hoping will distinguish *Homefront* in the increasingly homogeneous 'open world' category.

Kershner won't be drawn on how *The Revolution* is handling difficulty, however. Though the idea of being left with no recourse but to hit and run is exhilarating, more talented players might overwhelm the enemy if the balance is off. Particularly since on-the-fly weapon customisation and a Guerrilla Tool Kit you can fill with RC car bombs, distracting firecrackers and homebrew hacking devices builds towards an arsenal that even the KPA must eye with some jealousy. Switching the barrel of your shotgun for a grenade launcher mid-fight is fluid and cathartic, but it's also a power trip, which is at odds with the role of opportunist freedom fighter.

The game's Yellow Zones, which have yet to be shown, will be the test of Dambuster's commitment to its revolutionary colours. Civilians live here — people too afraid or too tired to be a part of the resistance. The tone ought to shift dramatically, since this is not the place for running battles. Here, knowing the trouble they can bring, citizens fear the gun-wielding freedom fighters as much as their oppressors, meaning cat-and-mouse evasion and damage mitigation as you witness how people survive under duress.

"We also have collaborators," Kershner says, "people who, when the occupation occurred, said, 'We'll work with you.' And it's not an evil decision, but collaborators throughout historical conflicts have never been well received by a civilian populace."

**The promise of** moral ambiguity is a good sign that Dambuster wants to push its narrative beyond power trip, too. The KPA aren't too nuanced — faceless cybersoldiers to a man — but this world presents a rare opportunity to discuss insurgency in a context other than beefy westerners shooting up outsiders. The question is how deep the team is willing to wade into the murk.

"I don't think we're shying away from it at all," Kershner says. "In terms of the game and the fiction of the world, insurgency is really a matter of perspective. So obviously for the occupational administration, they view the resistance as terrorists, and looked at through that lens, your actions could easily be considered as such. But when you see the oppression around you, you think, 'I am justified to want to fight back. I want these people gone.' It's the old axiom of 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter', and definitely in the context of the role that we put you in, you are the freedom fighter."

*The Revolution* skirts cliché: capture points and enemy strongholds that facilitate map expansion and progression aren't exactly novel. Yet there's also an undercurrent of naughtiness. Dambuster is taking a risk by putting players on the back foot, perhaps even more than it courts with its subject matter. Its Red Zones are racy variations on a theme, but depending on how it handles the mundane, *The Revolution* could be outrageous. ■

Showing its heritage, *The Revolution* is built in CryEngine, though it has adopted a muted palette of greys, browns and reds, rather than leafy greens

# BLOODBORNE: THE OLD HUNTERS

### Returning to Yharnam's blood-soaked cobblestones

While *The Old Hunters* was originally planned as a two-part expansion to Hidetaka Miyazaki's beguiling Gothic slasher, at some point during its six-month development the FromSoftware team decided that this DLC was a dish best served whole. It's certainly been a busy time for the Tokyo-based studio since Miyazaki's elevation to the role of president: its various teams are reportedly working on more titles today than ever before in the company's history. Such a heavy workload doesn't appear to have adversely affected *The Old Hunters*, however; indeed, the splicing together of these two addons seems to be born of artistic choice rather than commercial imperative.

Split across three distinct districts, *The Old Hunters* is almost a quarter of the size of the base game's map. With numerous new character builds, its glittering spells, ten additional weapons (that's main and off-hand armaments) and a host of fresh NPCs to be summoned to even the odds in your favour, this is the kind of generous return visit we've come to expect from the studio.

Not that *The Old Hunters*' scale is much in evidence from the frustratingly brief segment of it that is playable at this year's Tokyo Game Show. Instead, we are treated to a 15-minute zip over a hill (with Yharnam, still crumbling and still resplendent, in the distance) and down into a gully awash with puddles of blood and punctuated by grey reeds. Here, among the ruins, tumbledown masonry and wonky buildings, you'll be reintroduced to the familiar cast of enemy crows and crook-backed hags. But there are also rangy, red-eyed hunters pacing about in pairs, wielding scythes. Manage to defeat these, or sprint past them, and you'll be met with a boss battle in that most familiar of *Bloodborne* locales: a derelict church.

While the challenge has clearly been softened for the conference setting in order to allow as many attendees to make it through as possible, even in this *Bloodborne*-lite state,

the wonderful rhythms and texture of the original game have been preserved. The boss fight is, as ever, the best showcase, waged against a mournful quadruped with a goat-like head that's filled with chaotic teeth. This vile beast was once the Hunter Ludwig (Healing Church founder and he of the Holy Blade). Tactically, it varies approach, rushing you and lunging in to bite, before retreating to the ceiling for a moment's respite when its health bar is sufficiently nicked. While it's hiding, drops of blood drip to the floor, indicating its position. Fleeing this gory clue is imperative, since it heralds the beast hurling itself to the ground, hoping to pound you beneath its hooves. Occasionally, the camera wheels up behind Ludwig's head as you continue the fight from its point of view. It's a neat, if disorienting, trick.

**The three character** builds on offer at TGS showcase different weapons, the most immediately enticing of which is a curved sword that, in its more powerful form, becomes a bow and arrow, or 'Bowblade'. One character build, dubbed the Mensi Scholar — a reference no doubt to the Nightmare Of Mensis from the main game — comes with a clutch of spells, including icy shards that can be fired at enemies like spears. Another, dressed like a vagrant samurai, wields a katana that doubles as a bladed whip, with irregular, difficult-to-master rhythms.

The story is, in Miyazaki's typical style, abstruse and enigmatic. *The Old Hunters* thread will, however, be accessible at some point in the first half of the game, even if the team is warning that its challenge will be commensurate with the latter stages of the original. This is important to bear in mind for newcomers who pick up the final incarnation of *Bloodborne*, complete with the expansion, in December. For veterans, the low-cost, standalone DLC arrives a month sooner. Then the business of untangling *Bloodborne*'s deepest secrets can truly begin. ∎



## Riddle me this

At TGS, *The Old Hunters*' producer, Masaaki Yamagiwa, praised fans for their efforts in unravelling the original's knotted tangle of secrets. The expansion will, he confirmed, add to the story's mystery, but he also indicated that there are a number of conundrums yet to be properly unpicked. *The Old Hunters* will, Yamagiwa said, help shed light on these areas, providing useful clues and links. As any *Dark Souls* veteran will know, however, full closure is unlikely. And even if players do manage to piece *Bloodborne*'s scattershot story together, any formal confirmation that they've done so is unlikely to ever come from Miyazaki and his team.

EDGE

ABOVE **As well as the new stock of spells, *The Old Hunters* offers a clutch of fresh consumable items, including a rotten eyeball that fires magic bolts.**
LEFT **Ludwig's mess of limbs, uneven eyes and chaotic dental work is reminiscent of the One Reborn. The beast seems to deplore its own state, begging for help before the fight begins**



TOP **Tall, quick and devastating, the pacing red-eyed hunters that you meet in this expansion are as threatening as any you've fought in the original game.**
RIGHT **The bow and arrow combination proves flexible. Quick-draw arrows can be pelted at foes, with a more powerful, long-drawn attack if you hold the button down. Even in its bow form, the Bowblade offers a melee option: slashing at enemies with a clutched arrow**

# DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS

Square Enix stacks a JRPG on top of a Minecraft-like sandbox

The sense of shock at Square Enix's seemingly brazen act of plagiarism with *Dragon Quest Builders* soon dissipates if you recall that *Minecraft* was itself built upon a template established by the earlier and far less successful *Infiniminer*. And while this Japanese take on the Swedish phenomenon shares a general likeness in the arrangement of its HUD and brick-laden world, there have been some significant alterations to the formula beneath the blocks.

For one thing, this is a thirdperson-only take on the survival-builder-crafter narrative. It's a choice that provides more of a top-down view on the world, offering a clearer angle on your constructions. But this view comes at a cost: working in blocks is often fiddly and occasionally frustrating as you struggle to wrangle the cursor to highlight your chosen cube. It's also best not to put roofs on buildings, lest you obscure what's happening inside. This practical concern, forced by the choice of camera angle, undermines the fiction somewhat. The homes and castles you're building look unable to withstand the weather, let alone an enemy assault.

Still, control foibles aside, this is far from a poor man's *Minecraft* clone, and the *Dragon Quest* trappings provide more than mere decoration. Mojang's own, half-hearted quest structure, introduced to *Minecraft* as a way to provide an ending for players who needed one, is swiftly bettered here through Square's experience. The premise is designed to tie into the series' 30th anniversary next year, imagining what might have happened had the player, at the end of the first *Dragon Quest*'s story, decided to broker a deal with the final boss to rule half of the kingdom of Alefgard each, instead of challenging him to a duel. Your task is clear: mend the kingdom by reconstructing its towns, homes and workshops, and aid the citizens who live here.

Your creative endeavours are necessarily more structured than in Mojang's game. In a short demo at the Tokyo Game Show, an NPC roaming a derelict village implores you to clear the rubble and construct some housing. The rhythms of interaction are familiar to any *Minecraft* veteran: you dig, chop and harvest, fending off nearby slimes with your sword. Then, using these gathered materials and a workbench, you craft the necessary materials as specified by the building's blueprint. Everything is laid out far more clearly and explicitly than in *Minecraft*. Structures have a shopping list of required materials; once they're collected, the blueprint can be placed on the ground, showing you where to put the walls, beds and fireplaces. It's more of a paint-by-numbers approach than *Minecraft*'s deliriously open-ended proposition, but for some this will be an alluring positive.

**The formal questing** structure has allowed Square Enix to introduce much more storytelling into the world, too. In the demo, we meet a man who, after fleeing a gaggle of monsters, has built himself a hut so hastily that he's forgotten to include a door. He asks that you break through the wall to help out. It's a short vignette, but shows the potential ways in which the *Minecraft* template and the Japanese RPG can meld and align.

Arguably, *Minecraft*'s popularity derived precisely from its lack of formal structure. By freeing players from a quest-based framework, they're free to set their own goals, something that's allowed those of all abilities to express their creativity, be that through laying down a higgledy wall or building a scale replica of the Taj Mahal. *Dragon Quest Builders* is not only a reimagining of the conclusion to the first game in its series, then, but also a reimagining of how *Minecraft* might have played out had its designers followed a more formal tradition of game design. The result appears to be a tidier and cleaner experience, as reflected in the pristine blocks that replace *Minecraft*'s antiquated style. The question now is whether or not this constraining of formula results in an equivalent constraining of audience. ∎

## Build by numbers

Preset blueprints of buildings are one of the ways in which Square Enix aims to help less creative players put block to ground with confidence. Once collected, a blueprint can be overlaid on a patch of grass (providing the land is clear of rocks and other debris). It can then effectively be painted in by placing appropriate blocks on the applicable squares. Square Enix is quick to point out that these are just guidelines (although some quests will surely require that a blueprint is followed precisely) and that players will be entirely free to build as they desire. Whether this balance between form and formlessness works is the question that hangs over the entire project.
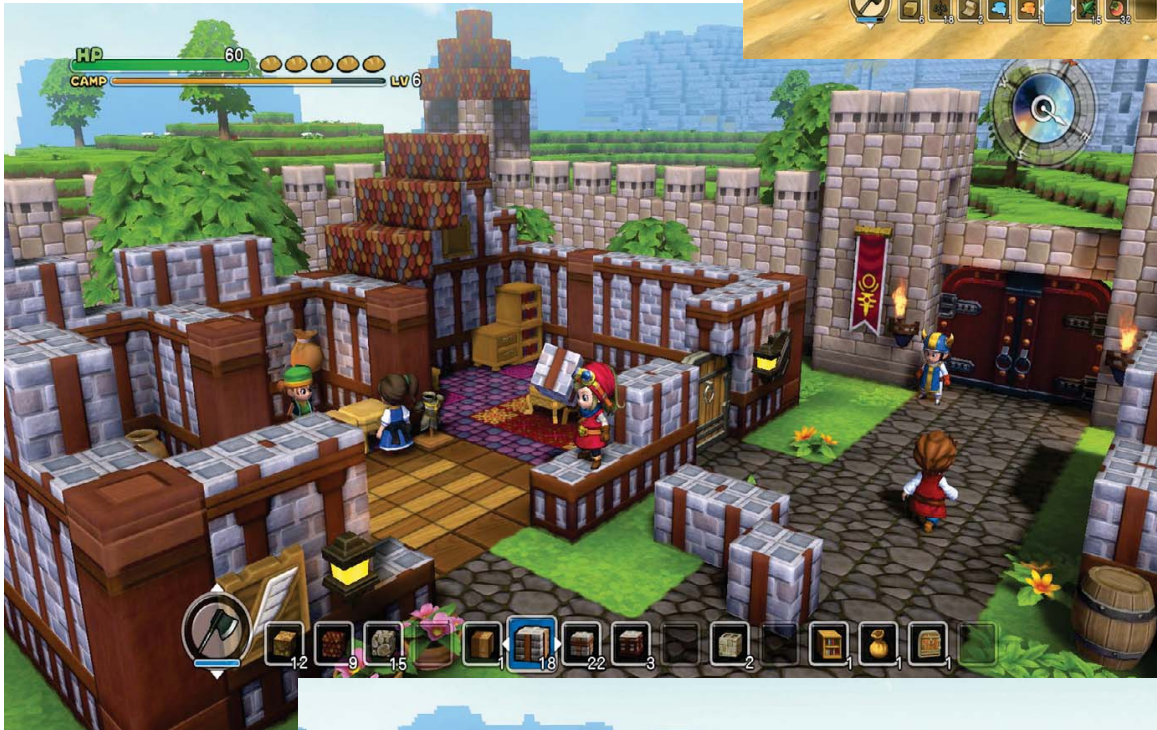
ABOVE **Dragon Quest's familiar and, in Japan at least, much-loved cast of villains is fully deployed here. Each type of monster drops a relevant crafting material, with more powerful foes providing some scarce resources**





TOP **Players have a health bar, and this must be kept topped up by eating food – either berries that have been scavenged from the land, or meals that have been crafted using gathered ingredients.** MAIN **Your home base camp can be levelled up, although quite what bonuses and opportunities doing so brings is currently unclear.** RIGHT **Dragon Quest Builders is a handsome game, taking the vibrant colours of Dragon Quest VIII and combining them with familiar-looking blocks**

# UMBRELLA
# CORPS

Capcom diversifies Resident Evil further

The creation of a droll pun almost certainly wasn't director Shinji Mikami's aim when he oversaw the invention of Umbrella Corps, the malevolent biomedical company that debuted in 1996's *Resident Evil*. But now Umbrella has become, well, something of an umbrella moniker for Capcom's increasingly diverse suite of games set within the zombie-infested universe, which now stretches from the creeping survival horror for which it's best known through to lightgun games and thirdperson shooters. This latest entry, announced at the Tokyo Game Show in September, takes its cues from western multiplayer shooter classics, combining the claustrophobic, duck-and-cover physicality of *Rainbow Six: New Vegas* with *Counter-Strike*'s quick-fire team-based pace. Lumbering zombies are liberally added to the mix, although every player starts the match with a Zombie Jammer, a device that ensures they won't be attacked by the undead unless it's damaged or the player shoots first.

While *Umbrella Corps* might look like an offshoot curio in the *Resident Evil* tradition, the developer is keen to emphasise that, in terms of its fiction at least, it's canon. The game takes place in the contemporary *Resident Evil* universe, set after the events of the sixth game and the destruction of Umbrella Corps. The timing provides the narrative premise: your team of mercenaries is one of several competing pharmaceutical companies hoping to be the first to procure the secrets of the defunct Corporation, whose advanced technology and bioweapons are invaluable and freely available to anyone who can find them.

The game, which Capcom hopes will help to re-establish the middle-sized market of

**Like the Flood in** *Halo: Combat Evolved,* **the zombies are intended to pose an unpredictable third element, adding randomness that can be manipulated**

LEFT **Thanks to the zombie shield, Capcom wants the pistol to be the tactical choice, rather than the last option when everything else has run out of bullets.** BELOW **There'll be no cross-play between PS4 and PC, an oversight if the game fails to secure substantial audiences on both systems**





When you throw a grenade, a radius outline shows the extent of the impending blast, indicating clearly how far you must retreat to exit the danger zone
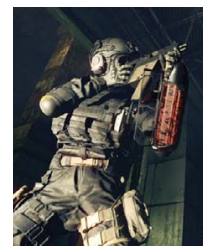
games, with a modest price tag to match (it will also be available via digital stores only), has been inspired by the team's love of 'survival' field games in Japan, the paintball-esque sport in which players wear body armour to offer protection from the otherwise painful pellet guns. This much was clear from the only mode that was playable at this year's Tokyo Game Show: One Life Deathmatch, a three-vs-three team game in which each player has just one life. Making sensible use of cover is crucial to moving through the narrow environment, and a so-called 'analog cover' system determines the distance you peek out of cover according to how firmly you hold down the button. A blue highlight target pops up on the nearest piece of masonry that can be snapped to and ducked behind. Despite the seemingly defensive poise, the emphasis is on speed and churn: one bumper launches a melee attack, another a grenade, and, other than being able to reload or swap weapons, the only other controls are run, aim or (a very speedy) crawl.

**Threats can come** from any direction, as the stages run vertically as well as horizontally: players may choose to camp above a stretch of corridor, or jump down only when a target passes beneath. Taking a moment to check the map screen can prove deadly. Then there are those zombies, which can be used as a tactical asset. Providing your Zombie Jammer hasn't been damaged by an enemy, it's possible to blend in to a huddle of undead and wait for a foe. If an enemy spots

you and fires into the group, the zombies will lunge, not at you, but at the attacker, becoming a kind of weaponised entourage. You can also lure a zombie with the pistol to latch onto the armoured bite guard on your arm, allowing you to drag it around by the mouth as a thrashing, yet preoccupied, shield. The Zombie Jammer provides protection but it's a large and easy target on your back. Manage to damage a foe's Jammer and they'll be set upon by any nearby threats, contributing to the chaos and allowing you to use *Resident Evil*'s resident grunts in more interesting ways than usual.

## The Zombie Jammer provides protection but it's a large and easy target on your back

The story is light – something that may come as a relief to players of *Operation Raccoon City* – but Capcom has clearly made an effort to integrate *Resident Evil* tropes into the mechanics. The issue for the team, which is reportedly comprised of *Lost Planet* and *Resident Evil* veterans, will be in improving the gunplay, the stiffness of which works against the quick pace toward which the development team is aiming. Movement through *Umbrella Corps* is also snappy and lacks weight. However, even if these aspects can be addressed, there's the broader question of whether or not there's a substantial enough audience for a fast-paced, close-quarters team shooter set within a universe that's not known for any of these things. But what is certain is that Capcom clearly believes *Resident Evil*'s survival is dependent on continued diversification. ∎

## Level pegging

The development team has chosen not to include a levelling system. Instead, as in *Street Fighter*, the player gains experience and improves in kind, rather than the avatar. But there's a points-based system involved. Your efforts are rewarded with a currency that can be used to customise your character. Capcom claims it has been careful with weapons balancing too, ensuring that each gun's strengths are countered by weaknesses. Every player takes a pistol, grenade and melee weapon (known as the 'Zombie Brainer'), but the final weapon in the loadout can drastically change the play style. There's no overpowered option, nor will any one particular weapon be well suited to the majority of situations.

## CHIBI-ROBO! ZIP LASH

**Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Skip Ltd **Format** 3DS **Origin** Japan **Release** Out now (Japan/US), Nov 6 (EU)
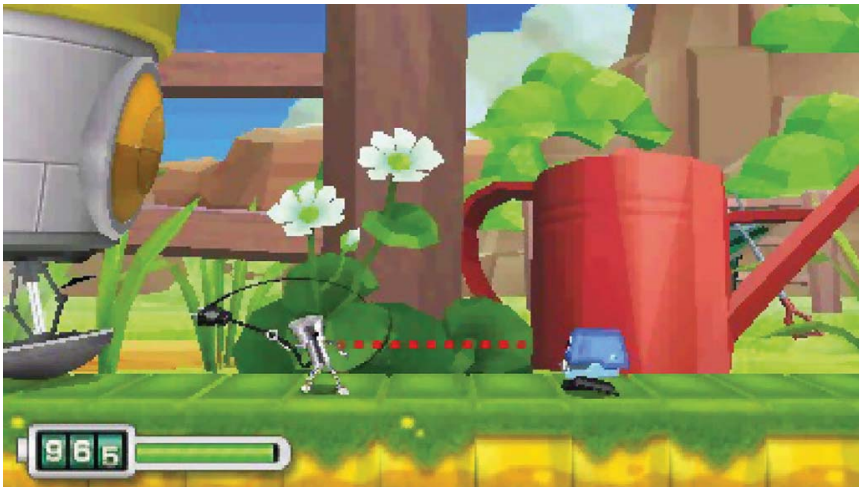


Skip's attempts to thread the series' neat-freak tendencies and oddball characters into an action-platformer might seem misguided, but this sedate side-scroller is not without its charms. Chibi's globe-trotting journey tasks him with tidying up Earth one continent at a time, using his plug as a grapple, a wrecking ball, and a weapon to fend off slow-moving foes. Depending on how generous you're feeling, the presence of branded snacks is either a cute touch that grounds the game in the real world or a particularly brazen example of product placement. But who are we to stand between Toby the toy plane and his Mentos?

## THEM'S FIGHTIN' HERDS

**Publisher/developer** Mane6 **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** April 2017



Born from the ashes of fan-made fighting game *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* – nixed by Hasbro despite the project's charitable aims – *Them's Fightin' Herds* is a spiritual follow-up built upon the *Skullgirls* engine. An Indiegogo campaign is asking fans to pony up a little over $400k to fund it. Assuming it succeeds (and with that title, it'd be a crying shame if it didn't), you won't be restricted to horse-on-horse battles: there are deer, bears and llamas, too.

## HITMAN

**Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Io Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Denmark **Release** March



The year of delays claims another victim. Io's reboot is the latest to need more time, so it can make more missions available at launch and update the hitlist more regularly. No bad thing – what we've seen so far is very promising, with larger sandboxes and greater player freedom than *Absolution*.

## ATTACK ON TITAN

**Publisher** Koei Tecmo **Developer** Omega Force **Format** PS3, PS4, Vita **Origin** Japan **Release** 2016



Based on the gory humans-versus-hungry-giants anime, this tie-in is a little rough-hewn, but the combat is intriguingly unconventional, combining Spidey-style swinging with the ability to latch onto limbs. You must avoid a Titan's flailing arms as you reel yourself in, lest you become their next snack.

## NI-OH

**Publisher** Koei Tecmo **Developer** Team Ninja **Format** PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** 2016



Originally announced ten years ago for PS3, this dark action-RPG has been revived. Based on an unfinished Akira Kurosawa script, it pits a silver-haired samurai against a slew of fierce oni. Team Ninja attempting a *Souls*-alike is a mouthwatering prospect, even considering its inconsistent post-Itagaki form.

## STAR OCEAN: INTEGRITY AND FAITHLESSNESS

**Publisher** Square Enix  **Developer** Tri-Ace  **Format** PS3, PS4
**Origin** Japan  **Release** February 25 (Japan), TBA (US/EU)

The latest entry in Tri-Ace's JRPG series shows no signs of raising its profile above B-tier status. It's not unattractive and promises a refined realtime battle system with seamless transitions between action sequences and story beats, but this is conventional fare, targeted firmly at the converted.

## ALLISON ROAD

**Publisher/developer** Lilith Ltd  **Format** PC
**Origin** UK  **Release** December 2016

*PT* may no longer be available, but this British firstperson horror game looks a fine substitute. Its trailer suggests a similarly distressing suburban nightmare, rendered in near photorealistic detail using Unreal 4. Lilith is threatening Oculus support, to which the only sensible response is: nope.

## PERSONA 5

**Publisher/developer** Atlus  **Format** PS3, PS4
**Origin** Japan  **Release** Q2/3 2016

Atlus has postponed its extraordinarily stylish roleplayer until next summer, leaving us with the briefest of glimpses of exploratory daytime scenes that marry *Catherine*'s anime aesthetic with the *Yakuza* games' appreciation for the details of contemporary Japanese life. Oh, Atlus, you dreadful tease.

## MONSTER HUNTER X

**Publisher/developer** Capcom  **Format** 3DS  **Origin** Japan  **Release** Nov 28 (Japan), TBA (US/EU)

Felynes are doing it for themselves: your diminutive allies are no longer supporting players but hunters in their own right. They're capable of tackling any regular quest and Capcom has given them exclusive bonus missions, too. Their attacks may not be as powerful, but with no stamina gauge they can keep their weapons unsheathed at all times and dig their way out of trouble. And mounting beasts? Not a problem when you've got your own portable trampoline.

## GRAVITY RUSH 2

**Publisher** SCE  **Developer** Team Gravity  **Format** PS4  **Origin** Japan  **Release** 2016

One of TGS's most pleasant surprises, this unlikely sequel to what was once Vita's best exclusive returns to the city of Hekseville, with protagonist Kat joined by antagonist-cum-ally Raven for co-operative combat. Kat clearly has a wider array of combat techniques, while her powers appear to have been subtly changed: rather than shifting gravity to fall in multiple directions, you'll have the freedom to pause and reorient yourself mid-flight. The cel-shaded look has transferred well to PS4, while in the meantime a port of the original (due in February, care of Bluepoint Games) should serve as a useful prepper.

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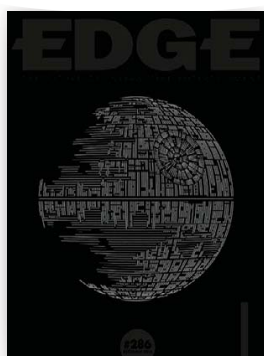
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# #286

## VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

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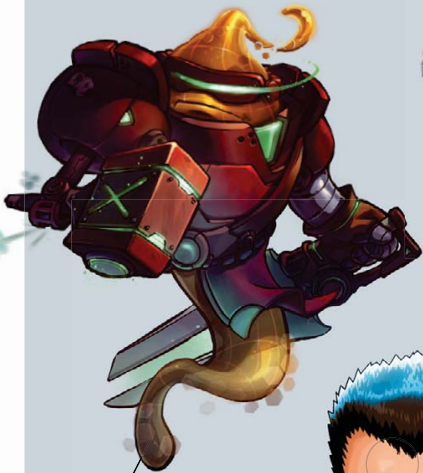
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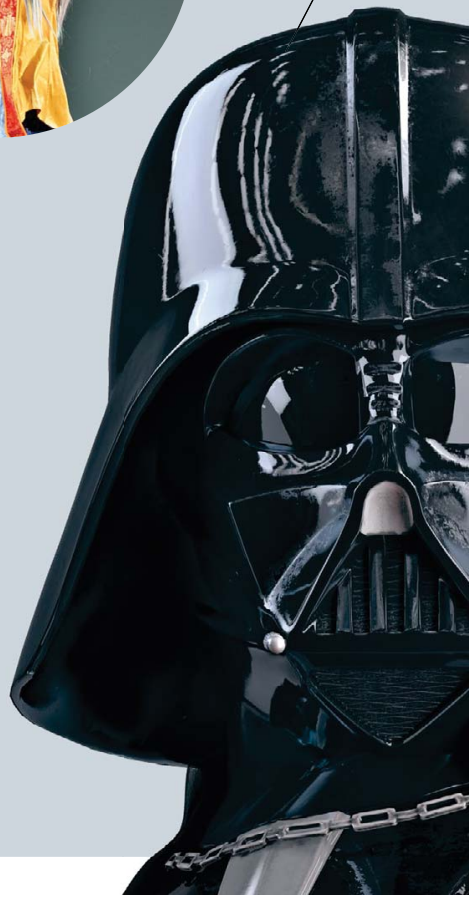
How DICE set about causing a
disturbance in the Battlefront series

**By Ben Maxwell**

# REVIEWING

▶

arth Vader is right in front of us, laying waste to the remainder of our panicked squad with swings of his lightsaber. Knowing that the Sith Lord is under the control of another player, his manifestation here simply a perk picked up on the battlefield, does nothing to diminish the power of his presence as he cuts down all around us. An attempt to slow him proves futile, the burst from our blaster rifle only ensuring that the imposing caped figure turns his attention to us. Our sortie an abject failure, we accept our fate and surrender to the searing blade, vowing to find a Luke Skywalker token on the next respawn.

It's just one example of the potency with which *Star Wars Battlefront* fulfils its fantasy. This is the original trilogy rendered at its highest fidelity yet, its clunking, battle-scarred technology, iconic uniforms and unforgettable locales brought to life by DICE's shimmering Frostbite technology. It's certainly a lot more palatable than the remastered versions. Every little detail, whether it's the fizzing blue video from comms feeds or the multicoloured crisscross of fluorescent blaster shots, feels like it's been directly lifted from a vivid childhood memory of the movies — and for good reason.

**"I grew up** with Star Wars," *Battlefront* design director **Niklas Fegraeus** tells us. "I had all the action figures. I watched the films a gazillion times, like every other kid. And it's no exaggeration to say that [working on *Battlefront* is] a dream come true. I can't find the proper words, but it's the ride of a lifetime. I'm going to remember it for the rest of my life."

Senior producer **Sigurlína Ingvarsdottir**, who worked on *EVE* at CCP before joining DICE, is just as enthused. She goes as far as to cite Star Wars as part of the reason she developed an interest in technology as a kid, went on to study engineering, and now finds herself working in games as a result. But their combined passion for the fiction did nothing to diminish the daunting nature of taking up the reins of such a cherished universe.

**Niklas Fegraeus, design director, and senior producer Sigurlína Ingvarsdottir**

"I was *completely* terrified," Ingvarsdottir admits. "But also incredibly excited. You don't even dare to dream about this kind of thing. You don't think, as a kid, 'I want to grow up and make Star Wars videogames,' because that's so unobtainable, so ridiculous. And then all of a sudden, that's the conversation that you're having. Someone is asking you, do you want to make this game? And you're like, '*Yes*, absolutely.'"

That kind of love for the source material is immediately apparent in the



sense of place and occasion that permeates the opening minutes of our first attempt at Drop Zone, the fourth mode to be detailed — after the game's co-op Horde-style Survival missions, 40-player Walker Assault, and aerial-combat-focused Fighter Squadron — ahead of the game's open beta, which took place in early October. The wail of a TIE fighter overhead cuts through the grand, familiar John Williams score, while the chatter of inter-squad communications and the directives from the vast Mon Calamari cruiser hanging in the sky overhead are as respectively earnest and stern as their '70s cinematic inspirations.

Although we play dozens of matches, we're limited to the Sullust map, a craggy labyrinth of geothermal protrusions and scars that are cooled by azure pools of water and shot through with pillars of steam and smoke. A Lambda-class shuttle, wings folded, towers over the sloping, igneous battlefield, while a crashed TIE Fighter provides a sobering reminder of the aerial battle taking place overhead.

Our objective is to capture and defend the escape pods that plummet from the capital ship above in what feels like a hyperactive, simplified twist on *Battlefield*'s Conquest. Drop Zone returns to more traditional king-of-the-hill roots, however, cutting the focus down to one point at a time, albeit regularly switching that objective's location. The winner in our case is the team to capture the most pods in nine minutes, though if the timer hits zero and the scores are tied, the game will continue.

Claiming a pod is a little different to taking a normal capture point too. For starters, it doesn't rely on you remaining in the vicinity once your claim has been staked. Instead, you

## "YOU DON'T THINK, AS A KID, 'I WANT TO MAKE STAR WARS GAMES,' BECAUSE IT'S UNOBTAINABLE"

activate the capture countdown by standing next to the pod and holding down an action button. Once the process is initiated, you're free to run wherever you want — you could nestle in an outcrop of black rock a few metres away, perhaps, or put some real distance between you and the pod and take up overwatch duties with a sniper rifle. So long as no opposing player is able to stand next to the pod for long enough to restart the countdown in their team's favour, it will merrily tick down until the point's in your possession. Shortly thereafter, a new pod will crash land and the next tussle begins. But a successful capture not

only ticks your team's score up a notch, it also grants a clutch of two or three powerups — a powerful Thermal Implosion Grenade, for example, or a tripod-mounted blaster cannon.

Gameplay feels immediate in a way that makes *Battlefield* or even *Call Of Duty* seem convoluted in comparison. There are only four different weapons to pick from for each side, and three of those are locked when you start. It's a similar situation for the Star Cards you can take with you onto the battlefield: you'll initially be able to take just one into the fray, but level up a little and your hand will increase to three. Each card bestows a cooldown-limited perk. The long-range Cycler Rifle, for example, delivers three sniper shots per charge. The Personal Shield generates an energy field around the user that lasts for seven seconds and repels fire from energy weapons, but does nothing to prevent kinetic munitions such as the Cycler or grenades. And the Ion Shot allows your standard weapon to fire ion-charged bolts for a short time that quickly deplete shields and do significant damage to droids and vehicles. This economy of design, combined with the clear objectives, makes for a
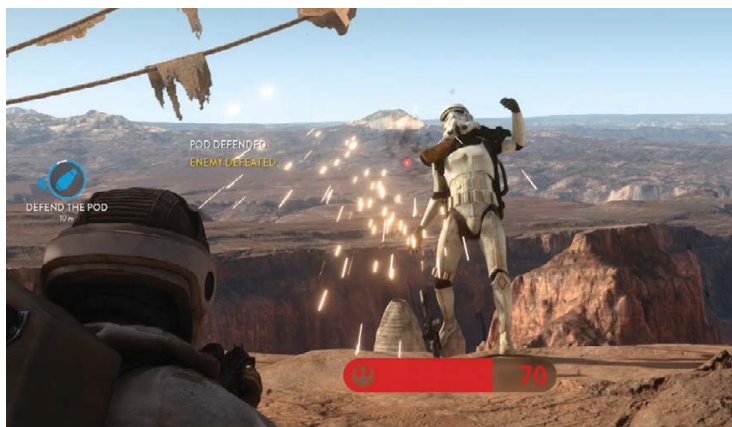
remarkably gentle on-ramp for an online competitive shooter. It is, of course, entirely deliberate.

"I think as games go through iterations, they generally become more and more complex," Ingvarsdottir says. "Many people like the fact that the game they already know increases in complexity, and I come from CCP and *EVE Online*, so I've seen that happen to one game over ten years. But Star Wars is loved by so many people, and it's a universe that so many people want to immerse themselves in — particularly when it's realised in the way that we



have realised it, with this level of fidelity and audio quality. I think that a lot of people will want to be able to enjoy this game."

That welcoming clarity shouldn't be mistaken for oversimplification, however. While it's true that there are fewer options and rules to wrap your under-fire brain around than in *Battlefront*'s most prominent online peers, there's still plenty of tactical depth underneath the smooth surface sheen. Those four blasters might do an ostensibly similar job, but there's enough variation when it comes to ▶

# EMPIRE BUILDING



## HAVE A GO HERO

Taking control of a Hero or Villain bestows you with extraordinary power and agility for a short period of time. A far-reaching jump allows you to zip around the battlefield quickly, while a lightsaber can be used to deflect incoming blaster shots. Your hand of Star Cards is replaced by three new abilities, perhaps including a Force attack and lightsaber dash move, and if you square up against an opposing Jedi and strike simultaneously, you'll enter into a face-off in which the victor is whoever taps the fire button most while your sabers are connected. The rush from duelling as battle rages around you far exceeds the joy of finally getting to pilot a jet in *Battlefield*.

# "IT HAS A LOT OF INTERESTING LAYERS, WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE ABILITY TO JUST JUMP IN"

fire rates and impact damage to cater to different styles of play. And the combination of Star Cards that you take with you allows for further specialisation. Defensive players might group a Jump Pack, Personal Shield and Cycler Rifle together, while more aggressive types might focus on shield-destroying bolts and grenades, plus the Sharpshooter card, which levels up and provides progressively larger reductions to the cooldown periods of your other devices when you land headshots.

Your hands of Star Cards are defined before a match, but you can pick two distinct sets and change between them when respawning, so switching tactics on the fly is still possible. And other mechanics have similarly subtle effects, such as the Active Cooling feature built into all guns. While there's no ammo to collect, sustained fire will overheat your weapon. But if you hit reload just as the descending meter falls within a narrow goldilocks zone, you'll instantly be able to fire again. Get it wrong, and you'll reset the cooling meter. The system's easy to fumble, ensuring that pulling off a successful auto-cool requires a little skill, but could mean the difference between emerging from a firefight as the victor or choking.

"*Battlefront* is a T-rated game that's meant to be played by a huge population of Star Wars fans: big and small, young and old," Fegraeus says. "Star Wars is so broad and appreciated by so many people, so [*Battlefront*] needs to be able to cater to all of those. That's been a guiding principle when it comes to developing it — it's supposed to be, and it really tries to be, inviting in that sense. But we don't want to sacrifice the depth and tactical layers — it's about finding that balance between easy to learn, hard to master, and just hard to learn, right?

"I think it's been very successful in terms of how we see players





The development team visited filming locations for the movies' best-known scenes to gather reference material and images. Photogrammetry was also used to ensure unimpeachable authenticity

approaching it when they jump in. They immediately get it, but once they've dug a little deeper, they start seeing, 'OK, I can change this out, tweak this, fiddle with that — I can devise my own strategy. I can team play with my [co-op] partner and my friends…' It has a lot of interesting layers, without compromising the ability to just jump in and have fun. And I think that's a very big strength of the game."

**While all of** the game's multiplayer modes have been devised to present as little friction as possible to all comers, DICE is still anticipating that many won't immediately dive into competitive play. "For some people, it will be their first multiplayer game," Ingvarsdottir says. "We hope that they get to learn the mechanics in the training missions and then play, maybe by themselves or with a friend, through the Survival missions, and play around a bit before making that transition over into the multiplayer."

The Survival missions pit one or two players against waves of Imperial troops and hardware in a Horde-style

mode that sees them try to survive after a crash landing. The mode has lost none of its charm, and appears mechanically unchanged, since we first tried it at E3. We're limited to the Tatooine map for our entire session, but the build also includes chunks of Sullust, Endor and Hoth. All offer Normal, Hard and Master difficulties, and you get a star for completing each tier. There are also bonus stars for besting Master without dying, and for scooping up all of the collectibles that emerge from the escape pods that crash down every couple of waves, plus there's a leaderboard for your fastest times in singleplayer and co-op.

But while Survival is a solid Horde variant, after a few rounds of battling AI through the same canyons, we're left longing for a little more variety — not least when it comes to the enemy types, which include vanilla Stormtroopers, shock troopers with natty red armour, jetpack-enabled, sniper-rifle-wielding sharpshooters, and the always-terrifying AT-STs. Even on Normal, enemy AI provides a stiff challenge, behaving for the most part in a convincingly unpredictable manner, but even played with a friend Survival missions will likely offer limited appeal over time. Their inclusion certainly won't mitigate the desire for a proper singleplayer campaign, but the option to play with a friend in splitscreen is delightful.

"I think [players miss] splitscreen modes — not that many games have splitscreen these days," Ingvarsdottir says. "So for us, and the way that we think this game will be played and how people will enjoy it, the missions felt like the right approach rather than a singleplayer campaign. I completely understand that a lot of people want a great singleplayer experience, but we decided to focus on the multiplayer experience."

There's plenty of inferred narrative commotion in *Battlefront*'s dramatic ▶

ABOVE **Exchanges of gunfire are usually explosive and short, but the taut spread of available weapons ensures that it's skill, and not investment, that determines who walks away from an encounter. The Drop Zone map's sloping topography means that sides continually acquire and relinquish a height advantage**

LEFT **Hoth's pristine snow plains provide a stark contrast to the explosions and brightly coloured chaos of blaster fire that cracks through the air. A network of trenches provides cover and it's also possible to enter the corridors and ship-filled hangar of the Rebels' Echo Base**

DEFEND THE POD



RIGHT **Strafing runs are difficult to pull off, but taking out AT-STs and ground troops in an X-Wing is a real thrill**

## RANCH BLESSING

In creating *Battlefront*, DICE has worked closely with Lucasfilm and Disney, the Swedish development studio being granted access to original props, having the opportunity to visit filming locations, and even setting foot inside Skywalker Ranch. "They've been extremely welcoming," Ingvarsdottir tells us. "They're obviously the creators and guardians of Star Wars, and they take that seriously, and they're dedicated and passionate about what they do. As are we about the games we make. And I think we share a similar mindset that makes it easier for us to see each other's point of view. Even if those points of view aren't necessarily aligned, I think we respect each other enough to resolve that."

Walker Assault mode. The 40-player battles might be numerically shy of *Battlefield 4*'s 64-strong encounters, but they feel no less lively as a result. The focus on AT-ATs makes for an intriguing shift in dynamic, since kills are demoted to being simply a by-product of your objectives. If you join the Rebel Alliance, you must take control of uplink stations across the map in order to call in Y-Wing bombing runs, making the otherwise-invulnerable AT-ATs temporarily susceptible to fire from all weapons and Snow Speeder tow-cable takedowns. Meanwhile, in order to allow the metallic behemoths to reach their destination and claim victory, the Imperial forces must do everything in their powers to prevent Y-Wings being called in.

It's in this mode that the stirring power of your emotional attachment to the two scrapping sides makes itself felt. Playing on the side of the US, China or Russia is all very well, but it offers nothing like the emotional resonance of taking up the Rebels' cause or striding into battle under the shadow of an AT-AT as an Imperial trooper. And even those highly emotive experiences are outshone by the

occasions when you encounter an iconic Hero or Villain character, such as Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, or Boba Fett on the battlefield — or, even better, take control of one of them via one of the many powerup tokens that dot each map. In such moments, it can feel like you've somehow wandered into the middle of a *Dynasty Warriors* game — though one in which the sea of enemies is player-controlled, not dull AI — such is the gulf between your abilities and those of your puny opposition. The imbalance of power is redressed with a continually decreasing

health bar, but slicing your way through enemies will top it up and buy you more time. No other game comes close to making you care about the outcome of the match to such an extent — even if you're not particularly devoted to the fiction as a whole. It's this sense of connection to each encounter that proves *Battlefront*'s greatest draw.

"There's the history of Star Wars, that epic struggle between the light side and the dark side, and these characters that you know and love," Ingvarsdottir says. "I don't think

LEFT **Tatooine's sandy canyons make for a complex, multitiered space in which to fight. A jetpack is essential**

people are as emotionally invested in many universes as they are in Star Wars. And I think that perhaps contributes to how seriously you take it, or how engaged you become."

**Another group of** fans taking things incredibly seriously are those who adored the first two *Battlefront*s. Ingvarsdottir isn't operating under the illusion that DICE can please everyone, and she's unrepentant when it comes to the creative decisions the studio has taken for this latest instalment in the series.

"For me, there was quite a lot of pressure," she admits. "But what's important to understand is that those games came out more than ten years ago, and shooters have evolved. Technology has evolved. Hardware has evolved. And DICE has been at the forefront of that evolution. So while we're being true to the spirit of *Battlefront*, we also have the confidence, even the audacity, to say we're resetting the franchise for a new generation of hardware and consumers."

Fegraeus feels similarly: "You can't just remake something that has already been made, because then you won't find a new audience, you won't develop, and you won't go forward — I think everyone understands the problems inherent in that. But you can't change everything, because then you move away from the core. So it's about finding a balance — how much of that do you keep but modify, and how much do you add in order to end up with something that feels new and fresh, and has its own identity in a very competitive market? It's been a challenge, but as I look at the game now that it's so close to shipping, I'm like, 'There's lots of damn good stuff in there that we managed to make. That's awesome — good job, us [laughs]!'"

And for every amputation from the original *Battlefront* games, DICE has a convincing replacement. Open space battles are gone, sure, but Fighter Squadron mode — in which players scrap over planetary surfaces — harks back to the Death Star dogfights and

battle of Hoth, which make up the majority of fighter engagements in the original trilogy, and also communicates the WWII-inspired life-and-death tussle of those films, where brave pilots push fragile craft beyond their design tolerances. Another bone of contention is that you can no longer pilot AT-ATs, only aim their guns. Still, by denying you the ability to point the lumbering walkers wherever you please, DICE ensures that they lose none of their majesty or threat when conjuring up the most nerve-shreddingly authentic interpretation of the Imperial assault on Hoth yet. Watching an implacable death machine trap its foot in the doorway of Echo Base under inexpert control might not deliver quite the same thrill.

"I've played tons of Star Wars games myself, and I have had all kinds of experiences with them — both good and bad," Fegraeus says. "But I want to tap into my own memories of what makes Star Wars great, and what Star Wars is to me. How do we capture that, and how do we make that into a reality? And that has guided me for the whole process — I haven't thought so much about other specific game experiences. It's been much more about figuring out how to make these fantasies come to life for players."

The combination of *Battlefront*'s uncommonly broad cultural appeal, uncomplicated design and persuasive pedigree has the potential to catapult it to immediate success, but it still has to face down something even more fearsome than a titanic walker: the prospect of yet another botched multiplayer launch. But *Battlefront* has the dual advantage of not arriving hand-in-hand with a resource-sapping singleplayer campaign and also coming after the lessons learned from two *Battlefield* launch debacles.

It would be a tragedy if those mistakes were repeated. DICE has created the most authentic Star Wars game yet, a multiplayer shooter that stirs like no other, and an impassioned love letter to fans. Now the network must ensure that it's delivered. ■

## S T A R   G A Z I N G

DICE design director **Niklas Fegraeus** is a Star Wars superfan. Here, he talks us through the process and challenges of making *Battlefront* as evocative and faithful as possible.

**Was it a challenge balancing the look of the original trilogy films with what you can do with Frostbite 3?**
One of the things that we discovered quite early on was that in order to really make it work and come together with all the props, characters and weapons, we needed a rendering technique that could allow for environments that shift quite profoundly. The reference material is the original props, and we needed them to work in both bright snowy environments and then if it suddenly becomes black and dark. Usually, you can't do that effectively – you have to tweak a bunch of things, preload and do technical stuff like that. So we combined a physically based rendering system with photogrammetry to get the fidelity we needed.

**As a fan, what was it like to get your hands on the original props?**
A bit of an emotional rollercoaster! The Lucas Cultural Arts Museum isn't a very fancy-looking place, just a house. It doesn't have any big signs, there's no neon, just this little elevator and a big door inside – nothing special. Then that door opens, you step in, and all over the place is all this magical stuff. I couldn't really grasp it at that moment. I just thought, 'I have to be professional,' so I immediately just ran over to something I knew was important and started working. After five minutes, I just had to stop as I couldn't focus on any work – I just started geeking out completely and had to get that out of my system. It was weird, and fantastic.

**You visited the original movie locations, too, right?**
Yeah. The [US] government shutdown [of October 2013] was in effect at the time, and one of the things that happens during those is that the people

who take care of the National Parks don't work, so they were closed. That meant we were denied access to some of the locations, so we had to… find other ways. Like proper Rebels.

**Did you encounter any problems in adapting the original props for the game?**
Not all the props look good close up. Take a Snow Speeder model as an example – it's used at a certain distance from the camera when they do the films, and it has a bunch of motion blur and it just goes by quickly. They didn't need to have a bunch of detail [for that]. Some of the props are marvellously detailed, others less so, but they've been adapted for where they need to be used, which is very smart. But in game, everything can be viewed from any angle, so it's been quite a job for our artists.

**How did you turn the original films' sound effects into versions that are suitable for a videogame?**
That's really one of those things that I think hasn't been mentioned enough when talking about the game. It's true that we were granted access to the original sound stems, and it was incredible to see the sound guys geek out on those. But, of course, they're not enough to provide a soundscape to an entire videogame. So tons of work has gone into filling in the gaps, so to speak. The sound guys have done some really splendid work that complements the work by Ben Burtt, John Williams and all of the legends that did the original stuff. It really sounds Star Wars to me – sometimes it's kind of hard to tell when Williams stops and our composer takes over.

**Presumably you and the team had a few Star Wars film nights in the course of developing the game?**
[Laughs] How did you guess? Since we used them as reference, we watched them countless times. But when it comes to me just personally watching the films for my own enjoyment, I think I've seen them maybe, I don't know, two or three hundred times. I include my childhood in that number.

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Star Wars' lasting impact on gaming
is owed to innovation, not repetition
**By Chris Thursten**

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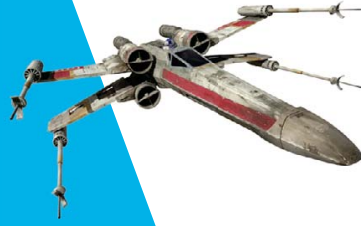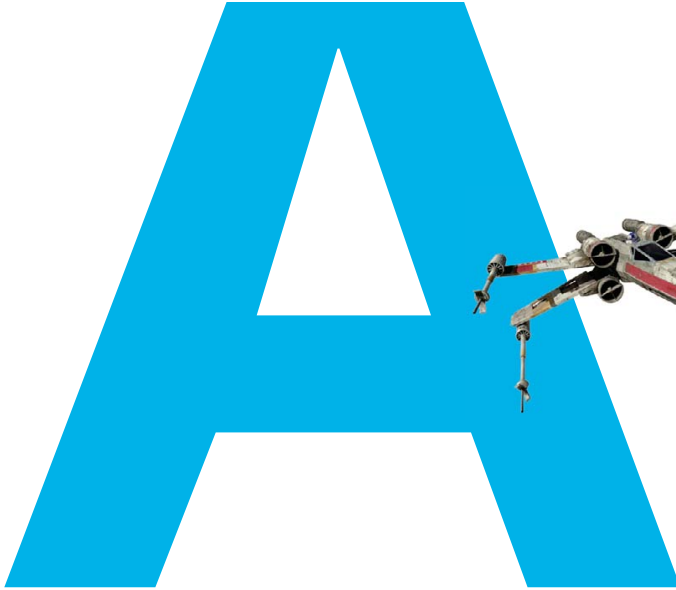
rare primacy stands at odds with an uncomfortable truth: Star Wars is often, and to an unusual degree, awful. None of the franchises that match its reach also match its inconsistency. Three of six (currently extant) films are profoundly inadequate. The series that gave the world X-Wings also gave it Gungans. The universe featuring the most iconic masked villain in popular culture also contains a character whose name is actually and earnestly 'General Grievous'.

In games, excitement endures for *Battlefront* despite, for example, the series' recent diversion into risible mobile tie-ins. Star Wars has survived an extraordinary run of low ebbs and retained its power to draw people in each time it returns. The mark it has left on the videogame industry — which is significant — remains a broadly positive one despite this legacy of dross. This is the mystery of Star Wars, and in tracing the points of commonality between its best moments something is revealed about the enduring popularity of the whole.

It's easy to forget that 1977's A New Hope was an innovative film: in its storytelling, the technology that facilitated its storytelling, and in the episodic structure implied by the decision to call it 'Episode IV'. It is an inbetweener of a movie, naive as science fiction but mature in the context of the matinee fantasy cinema that inspired it. An enormous effort was made to raise the technological ceiling of popular filmmaking, moving away from Flash Gordon camp towards the believable heroism of The Dam Busters and 633 Squadron. Director George Lucas sought to bring Kurosawa to the west while also reframing Campbell's hero's journey through the same lens that produced American Graffiti. As heroic homelands go, Skywalker's Tatooine owes just as much to Lucas's own Californian wilderness as it does to the barbaric Cimmeria of Robert E Howard's Conan stories.

Star Wars was not wholly original, but it was the product of novel synthesis. It required a set of deliberate and intelligent imaginative leaps to combine these elements in this way, and the result was a fictional setting that held fantasy and believability in precise balance. From the alien but knowable and lived-in interiors of Mos Eisley to the scratched hulls of the Rebel Alliance's war-worn




*Dark Forces* (right) was a far cry from the scorpion-dodging days of *Super Star Wars*. For the first time, a Star Wars action game successfully placed you inside a believable world

starfighters, the Star Wars universe felt — and, at its best, feels — like a place that could be lived in. That is a powerful imaginative draw. The most successful Star Wars games are the ones that take that imaginative engagement with this fictive space and make it, one way or another, real.

**At the beginning** of the 3D age, games gained the power to recreate places in detail rather than evoke them in abstract. The earliest Star Wars games had used the technology of their time to represent moments from the films as best they could, but their ambitions couldn't stretch further than that. *Super Star Wars*

could reproduce sounds, images and certain set-pieces, but applying these to the 2D side-scrolling format ensured that it could never feel like a world.

3D changed that. Starting in 1993 with *X-Wing*, technological advancement gave developers the opportunity to rebuild the Star Wars universe within the context of an interactive experience. Although the impetus to do so may well have been to recreate a beloved cinematic image (the urge to slap a Star Wars skin over anything persists among modders to this day), the technology required had to be built from scratch. 1995's *Dark Forces* is sometimes described as a clone of *Doom* with the Star Wars licence, but that is understating its importance.

In order to achieve their goal of placing the player inside the Star Wars universe, *Dark Forces'* developers created the Jedi Engine. The result was the first FPS in which the player could jump and swim, the first to require the player to regularly look up and down, and the first where two rooms could be placed one above the other. It was also an early pioneer of the use of atmosphere-enhancing scripted sequences. Rather than use this technology to retell the story of the movies, *Dark Forces* opted for an original narrative with new characters and voice acting. Taken in combination, these innovations set an important landmark in the  ▶

The film is naive as science fiction but mature in the context of the matinee fantasy cinema that inspired it

EDGE

*TIE Fighter* (left) made a concerted efort to simulate the life of an Imperial pilot. The *Rogue Leader* series (right) focused on graphical fidelity and gratifying, arcade-like recreations of classic battles

journey of the FPS from arcade-derived blaster to narrative delivery mechanism.

In the case of *Dark Forces*, Star Wars inspired the creation of technologies and ideas that videogames as a whole would imitate. It was a successful Star Wars game not simply because it was fun and evocative, but also because it shared the same impetus to create new technology to offer a new experience.

The successor to *X-Wing*, *TIE Fighter*, was released in 1994, and by 1999 the series' run of expansions and sequels had come to an end with the release of *X-Wing Alliance*. *XWA* was released on the eve of Star Wars' cinematic return, predating The Phantom Menace by only a couple of months. In hindsight, early 1999 represents a crucial turning point for Star Wars — and the *X-Wing* series, which gained sophistication cumulatively over its six-year run, is emblematic of a particular era and a particular attitude.

These games were simulators of fictional spacecraft, as influential within their own genre as *Dark Forces* was for the FPS. The drive here was, again, to use gaming technology to realise the fantasy of occupying a place of your own in the Star Wars universe. The stories they told ran alongside the films, their lead characters ciphers for the player. They were designed to facilitate the telling of new Star Wars stories by the player, tales of dogfights gone awry and heroic assaults on kilometre-long Imperial cruisers.

The development process that led to this was innovative and iterative at every stage. First came the 'simulation' of the working of the spaceships

themselves: the relationships between subsystems, the exact way that shields function, the capabilities and weaknesses of each craft. This is an example of game design interacting with storytelling at a fundamental level, the drive to create an entertaining game balanced against the need to represent fictional devices at their highest ever level of fidelity. Players of the *X-Wing* series not only receive an experience evocative of sequences from the films, but they gain a systemic understanding of the technology of the Star Wars universe that enhances their understanding of those sequences.

Next came advances in AI, multiplayer, and engine-level changes needed to facilitate the largest Imperial ships and mid-mission hyperspace jumps. Mission creation tools were a late and natural addition, formal acknowledgement that these games had always been about, in some way, the creative engagement of the player.

**Released in 2003,** *Star Wars Galaxies* represented — in its initial form — the culmination of those ideas. In this instance, the genre being advanced under Star Wars' auspices was the persistent world: the shared-universe online game pioneered by *Ultima Online* and represented today almost solely by *EVE Online*. In the final years before *World Of Warcraft* established the precise meaning of the term 'MMOG', *Star Wars Galaxies* suggested an alternative path for the genre — one where players built their own towns, cities and economies, where they set their own goals. LucasArts' substantial investment in this growing area resulted in an MMOG that likely couldn't have existed without the Star Wars licence, touched the fringes of greatness with it, and was ultimately pulled apart by it.

The promise of *Galaxies* was of a life not in one part of the Star Wars universe, but all of it: a seamless experience that would bring together ground combat, cantina life, spaceflight, wilderness exploration and so on. It was almost a triumphant success, but was rife with bugs and balance issues. Star Wars, meanwhile, was changing. Iconic characters and experiences were the order of the day, in the years following the release of Attack Of The Clones. The developers of *Galaxies* were encouraged to recalibrate their user-driven world as a designer-driven theme park — a philosophical position that is common to the weaker Star Wars games.





*Star Wars Galaxies* players could choose to become Stormtroopers, traders or dancers, but the lure of Jedi powers created a balance issue that ultimately fractured the community of SOE's game

Star Wars in general was no longer experimental, innovative, or the result of synthesis. It had become a creative enterprise dedicated to reproducing itself, both self-referential and self-reverential. This manifested sometimes as deep creative rot — the 'weak photocopy' effect of the second wave of movies — and at others as a simple and slavish dedication to a set of images. Repetition eroded Star Wars' sense of space and time: old movies rewritten and remastered, pulled out of their context and mined for symbols and soundbites.

This shift wasn't simply evident in the games. Star Wars' transition from fictional landscape to collection of approved images occurred as merchandising moved from the sidelines to become, arguably, the franchise's primary form of expression. The T-shirt stand had moved from the foyer to the main stage, and in games this manifested as an enthusiasm for straightforward film adaptations in well-understood genres, resulting in games such as the simplistic vehicle-action game *Star Wars Episode I: Battle For Naboo* and a succession of mediocre action platformers aligned to releases in the second movie trilogy. Despite the creative opportunities afforded by a new generation of consoles and more widespread access to online multiplayer, Star Wars no longer represented the potential of games to open doors to other worlds: it represented the potential for games to round out a movie's merchandising portfolio.

Arguably, Star Wars games have never reclaimed that innovative streak — both Star Wars and triple-A game development have undergone dramatic changes in circumstance in the decade since. This doesn't mean that there have been no good new Star Wars games since 2003, but it does adjust the criteria for success. With systems-driven, technology-driving Star Wars games in decline, and the series' frame of reference located squarely within its own borders, it fell to game developers to build a smarter Star Wars from the inside out.

In 2003, as *Star Wars Galaxies* set out on its doomed journey, BioWare's *Knights Of The Old Republic* neatly evaded the same fate. The decision to set a Star Wars game in an entirely new era, with entirely new iconography, was unprecedented. Certain novels and comic books had gestured at the time before the original trilogy, but few had ventured there for long. The Republic era — the period covered by the prequel movies — was off-limits, awaiting future cinematic expression. Turning the clock back thousands of years to a time without X-Wings, Stormtroopers or rebels was a significant decision for Star Wars in general.

**It was this** move that granted BioWare creative freedom that the studio was unlikely to have otherwise enjoyed — freedom to ignore the story of those iconic few characters and rebuild Star Wars on its own terms. Where developers had once sought to use games to simulate a setting they loved, here BioWare used the RPG format to variously criticise, eulogise and rekindle the series' spirit.

*Knights Of The Old Republic* allowed players to re-encounter ideas that had been worn down to the point of frictionlessness. The revelation of Luke and Darth Vader's relationship — once, believe it or not, a twist — was recreated in the shocking moment where Darth Revan's mask finally came off. A different sort of Han-Chewie relationship is seen through Mission Vao and Zaalbaar, more precocious sister and protective older brother than bickering buddy-cops. Through Bastila Shan, the Jedi are reintroduced in a way that stresses their dignity, austerity, and to some extent their hypocrisy — a sophisticated presentation that the prequel movies failed to achieve.

Obsidian's 2004 sequel, *Knights Of The Old Republic II*, turned reconstruction into deconstruction. Released too soon and too unfinished to have the impact it perhaps should, it told a far more thoughtful story than, as a licensed game, it perhaps had any right to. This is a game entirely about the glaring problems with the series' central light/dark dichotomy. Star Wars' essential naivety is skewered by Kreia, an elderly Jedi who fills the Obi-Wan Kenobi role from a position of withering cynicism.

The *Knights Of The Old Republic* series also saw the successful translation of PC RPG design to console. BioWare established a formula that took the combat, conversations and storytelling of *Baldur's Gate* and applied it to something with the bearing of a cinematic action game. That this particular treatment also had to be made to work on Xbox was the impetus behind design principles that led to *Mass Effect* and the hybrid RPG-action game in general.

The original *Battlefront*, released in 2004, was a success because it managed to make large-scale joint-arms online warfare work on consoles. It survived ropey gunplay and lacklustre AI because Star Wars ground warfare had rarely been made to work at this scale, and because its sandbox modes provided players with a degree of imaginative input into the types of scenario they encountered. Galactic Conquest mode added a freeform strategy layer, threading together individual matches into a battle for supremacy across multiple planets. On PC, modding tools encouraged a passionate ▶



*KOTOR*'s new galaxy (top) was a major departure for Star Wars in general. Traditional settings remained the norm, however, as in the first *Battlefront* (above)

## AN OLD HOPE

The latest changes to the Star Wars expanded universe have stranded ongoing MMOG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* in its own pocket galaxy. The *KOTOR* setting now falls under the 'Legends' brand, separate from the cinematic canon. This grants BioWare more freedom of movement, but also confuses an already-confusing offering. Sold on story but now officially unofficial, the game's forthcoming expansion *Knights Of The Fallen Empire* promises new, episodic Star Wars – but not the same Star Wars as players will see in the cinema. As important as novelty is to Star Wars, this universe has always drawn strength from the contribution that each new idea has made to the whole. Splitting up the fiction in this way is a manoeuvre borrowed from the comic-book industry, designed to make the core franchise more accessible – but whether it's effective in this case remains to be seen. Taken in isolation, *Fallen Empire* risks looking like fan fiction.

The next generation needs to do more than rearrange well-loved images with better tech

**Despite the modern technology it employs, Bandai Namco's *Star Wars Battle Pod* coin-op is unapologetically retro. Like the very first *Star Wars* arcade game from 1983, it delivers a whistle-stop tour of famous cinematic moments**

community of creators to form around the game.

2005's *Battlefront II* patched up the original's weaknesses while bilaterally expanding its offering. The robust singleplayer campaign, which spanned battles from Attack Of The Clones to The Empire Strikes Back, applied *Battlefront*'s shooter sandbox to the reenactment of well-known moments. On the other hand, a returning Galactic Conquest mode was enhanced by space combat and deeper tactical options on the strategy map. Cutscenes were created that played the ramifications of victory for your chosen faction — *Battlefront II* is a rare example of a mainstream Star Wars game making a concerted effort to provide players with the tools they needed to tell their own stories.

**In that regard,** the original *Battlefront* series represents a successful attempt to serve Star Wars' longstanding fanbase alongside its much younger target demographic. Arguably, however, the most significantly innovative Star Wars game of the noughties was aimed squarely at the latter. The first *Lego Star Wars* game was not technologically innovative in the way that Star Wars games had been in the past, and it didn't seek to evoke the world suggested by the films — quite the opposite. It was, however, tonally revolutionary, well regarded as a children's game, and vastly influential. Given the prevalence of Lego games today, it is easy to forget that they began life as Star Wars tie-ins.

*Lego Star Wars'* willingness to treat Star Wars iconography with irreverence, as a malleable jumble of toys, is what allows it to bypass the conflict between formulaic reconstruction and earnest world-building. Its mechanics and structures are not specific to Star Wars — hence why they have been successfully applied to so many other franchises — but they are honest to how children encounter the series in its latter years, with its vast and layered slate of characters, plotlines, devices, places and so on. Here, that mountain of merchandise is welcomed onto centre stage and made fun of. After years of U-turns and jarring tonal shifts (see 'Excessive Force'), *Lego Star Wars* demonstrated that the most mature thing Star Wars could do was not take itself so seriously.

Quiet years followed the release of *Lego Star Wars: The Clone Wars* in 2011. The drive to spin out the

prequel era lost momentum, while Disney's switch in focus to the mobile market killed games that might have occupied the long gap, such as the promising-looking *Star Wars 1313*. The seventh movie approaches, bringing with it a renewed enthusiasm for the original trilogy on the part of LucasArts — an acknowledgement, possibly cynical, of the need to return to those characters, that time and those ideas. The relaunched *Battlefront* is the first of what will almost certainly be a wave of new Star Wars games.

The nature of this new universe is, however, unknown. The old Expanded Universe is gone; X-Wings and Stormtroopers have, one way or another, returned. This could offer a similar opportunity to game developers to the one encountered in the 1990s — the chance to use games to spark a deeper understanding of the Star Wars universe, to offer context and meaning to well-loved images in a manner that suits interactive media particularly well. This, however, will require a return to an old-school attitude alongside the old-school narrative.

The icons of Star Wars' past are back but they are, notably, being treated as icons. This answers one concern about the post-prequel era, but not its underlying structural problems. The next generation of Star Wars games needs to do more than rearrange well-loved images with better tech: it needs to rekindle the spark of innovation that created those images in the first place. Anything less amounts to a theme park — and Star Wars, when it has worked, when it has won over its most dedicated fans, has always been a place you live in, not a place you visit. ■

**Irreverence and thoughtful design helped *Lego Star Wars* become more than just a cash-in. Generous with characters and things to do, it's a great example of design for kids that also appeals to older players, its family-friendly nature at the heart of the series' success**

# tokyo rush

EDGE

Going by the sights of Tokyo Game Show 2015, the rumours of Japanese gaming's demise have been greatly exaggerated

BY SIMON PARKIN

f rom the vantage point of the V² Tokyo, a stratospheric nightclub in the Roppongi Hills, the notoriously sleazy district outside looks almost beautiful. A constellation of red and white lights twinkle far below, surrounding the lunging strip-club touts, with their "Hey, how you doing tonight?" opening gambits. There are stars up here in the V² Tokyo too, nestled between mirrored pillars and tousle-haired waiters in their bow ties and pristine aprons, who carry platters of teetering rum-and-Cokes. The great and the good of the Japanese videogame industry are gathered here tonight before the official opening of the 25th Tokyo Game Show. And while these luminaries may be fewer in number than in years gone by, they seem more determined than ever.

Koji Igarashi, once assistant director of *Symphony Of The Night*, holds court over a gaggle of younger Japanese developers in one corner. He looks content in his post-Konami life, no doubt buoyed by the recent success of the $5.5 million Kickstarter campaign for his new *Castlevania* remix, *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*. If those newspaper reports detailing the challenging working conditions at Konami are true, who can begrudge his contentment? Meanwhile, 17-Bit founder Jake Kazdal weaves through the crowd, canvassing opinion on whether or not his studio's latest release, *Galak-Z: The Dimensional*, is too difficult. The game will soon arrive on Steam, and the designer, known for *Skulls Of The Shogun* and his work on Tetsuya Mizuguchi's *Rez*, is eager to improve its chances, albeit while preserving his vision.

*Papers, Please*'s Lucas Pope, also a Tokyoite, discusses his forthcoming *Return Of The Obra Dinn*, and the difficulty a solo creator has in knowing when to stop tinkering and just get the game out the door. As Tomohisa Kuramitsu, better known by his DJ name Baiyon, sets the drum'n'bass ambiance, Dewi Tanner, a Welshman who once worked alongside *PaRappa The Rapper*'s Masaya Matsuura, talks in excited tones about his first few weeks working at Sega in Japan's capital. He joined the company's mobile team, he says, to help "make Sega great again". Even Fumito Ueda, that phantasm of the Japanese development scene, makes a brief appearance, although he spends most of his 20 minutes murmuring intensely into his phone, trying to sort out a problem with *The Last Guardian*'s stand on the show floor. That stand is the corner-piece of Sony's booth, a vast screen that runs from the floor most of the way to the ceiling, onto

## OF 1,283 GAMES PRESENT AT THE SHOW, ALMOST HALF OF THEM APPEAR ON SMARTPHONES

which Trico, the bird-dog creature from Ueda's long-absent game, is projected and with whom attendees can interact by waving their hands. The installation, mirroring the game it promotes, does not have an easy ride of it over the four days, suffering technical difficulties, yet its impact is nevertheless significant. As a piece of work it is ambitious, a characteristic shared by the organizers of this year's Tokyo Game Show. As **Hideki Okamura**, chairman of CESA (the show's organiser), puts it in the official programme: "We are doing our utmost to ensure that the event promotes further development of the game industry and even the Japanese economy."

If Japan's game development scene has declined in recent years, then the fans appear oblivious. The 5am subway train out of Tokyo station en route to Kaihin-Makuhari, the closest platform to the cavernous Makuhari Messe convention centre,




FROM TOP ***Return Of The Obra Dinn*** **from Lucas Pope;** ***The Last Guardian,*** **not playable at TGS but still able to draw crowds**

is standing room only on the morning of the show's first public day. A thick line of punters wends in hurried silence through the Chiba streets, still grey in the emerging hum of daybreak. Neither America's E3 nor Europe's Gamescom are able to lure quite this many visitors from their beds quite so early. Indeed, this year's TGS boasts the event's second-highest attendance figures since its inauguration in 1996, hosting a quarter of a million visitors across the show's four-day stint. There are 480 exhibitors (246 of which are foreign), including the 69 independent game makers who together compose the Indie Game Area. Young game designers from Osaka Electro-Communication University show off their projects, and there is an undeniable buzz on the show floor about the future. Japan, everybody seems to be saying, is down but far from out of the race. Nevertheless, the fact that this industry has changed in profound ways during the past decade is also made clear in the official statistics. Of the 1,283 games present at the show, almost half of that number appear on smartphones.

**Some of the** largest stands are given over to these iOS and Android titles. *Granblue Fantasy*, the smartphone-based RPG created by ex-*Final Fantasy* team members (including, notably, series composer Nobuo Uematsu), has a stand that is larger than Capcom and Sega's combined, with a gigantic airship as its centrepiece. It is surrounded by a few hundred tethered smartphones on which visitors can play the game. *Clash Of Clans* boasts a similarly extravagant stand, as does *World Of Warships,* the most recently released free-to-play PC game ▶

While most game conventions around the world have introduced cosplay competitions, TGS's remains the most involved, with scores of competitors bringing along intricate, expensively produced costumes, not to mention some killer face wigs

For the first time since the event's inception, Tokyo Game Show sprawls across all 11 of the Makuhari Messe's halls – even if there is a fair amount of vacant floor space

from Wargaming. The latter has been tailored for the Japanese market by including lavish anime cutscenes featuring improbable schoolgirl naval captains.

Console games are a minority, then. Neither Microsoft nor Nintendo have a presence at the show, leaving Sony to do the heavy lifting, with more than 100 PS4 titles on the floor. Most of these are decidedly Japan-focused and there are few major novelties. The strongest games of the show are, in most cases, addenda or spinoffs, such as *Bloodborne* expansion *The Old Hunters* and *Metal Gear Online*, which combines the stealth strategising of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*'s main campaign with the fire and fury of squad-based combat.

There are two new playable characters for *Street Fighter V* (a game that tells its own story of shifting Japanese soil in the fact that it is being developed with Sony's financial support and will not, for the first time in the series' storied history, make an appearance in coin-op form). Meanwhile, Square's *Dragon Quest Builders* is an adorable thirdperson-viewed tribute to the era-defining *Minecraft*, which is itself also present on the show floor, squeezed onto Sony's Vita. (A Mojang insider makes it clear that Japan is a key priority for the company in the coming months.)

At Sony's press conference, the company announces *Gravity Rush 2*, a PS4 sequel to its idiosyncratic Vita title, and also shows off *Gravity Rush Remastered*, an HD version of the original, plus its DLC, also destined for the console. Elsewhere, Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi confirms that *Yakuza 6* is in development, although it won't be seen prior to the release of the HD remake of the series' first game. And the flamboyantly titled *Kingdom Hearts HD II.8*, with its mismash of Roman and Arabic numerals, provides further evidence that director Tetsuya Nomura is a serial tinkerer. This, of course, will not be new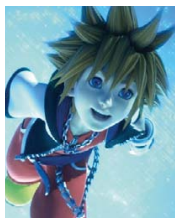s to followers of *Final Fantasy XV*, the long-awaited sequel that hopes to undo the damage rendered by *Final Fantasy XIII*. *FFXV*, which is built upon foundations laid down by Nomura in the unreleased *FFXIII Versus*, isn't playable on the show floor, but Square Enix is eager to assure fans that the project is on course for its 2016 release.

New footage shows the introduction of drift-capable Chocobo mounts, and a luxurious fishing minigame. Director Hajime Tabata spends time during the show behind closed doors speaking with fans, taking on their criticisms and feedback. The team, he says, has been taking cues from major open-world successes such as *The Witcher III* and *Metal Gear Solid V*, and he even admits to meeting with series founder Hironobu Sakaguchi recently to seek advice. The immense

pressure on these costly blockbusters, especially in a post-*Metal Gear Solid V* world, is clear. Perhaps it's for this reason that many of Square Enix's forthcoming titles are focused on the Japanese market, including *Gunslinger Stratos*, *Lord Of Vermilion Arena* and *Alice Order*, plus new iOS/Android entries in the company's enduring *Secret Of Mana* and *SaGa* RPG series.

Capcom's booth is dominated by its bankable franchises, with *Monster Hunter X* and its more cartoonish cousin, *Monster Hunter Stories*, for 3DS, *Resident Evil Zero HD Remaster* (there is no sign of *Resident Evil 7*), and a new *Ace Attorney* game for 3DS, *Dai Gyakuten Saiban: Naruhodo Ryunosuke No Boken*. The latter of these is promoted via an exhibition stand decked out like a tiered court with handhelds positioned on the jury benches. The company's only new proposition is *Resident Evil* spinoff *Umbrella Corps*, a cut-price three-on-three shooter. Bandai Namco, meanwhile, presents *God Eater Resurrection* and a gaggle of releases based on the company's popular Japanese anime licences, including games themed around JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, Gundam, Naruto and Dragonball Z.

The indie booth provides less expected curios. *PooPride* is a scatological racing game that's already available for Google Play. It was created by Akihiko Koseki, a designer who once worked alongside Satoru Iwata at Intelligent Systems. *Shadow Shooter* boasts one of the most unusual interfaces yet



FROM TOP **Kingdom Hearts HD II.8 is a compilation of old and new; Capcom worked with an expert to ensure Rashid's garb is culturally accurate**

## YOU HAVE TO GROW AND SHIP HUMAN ORGANS, WHICH SPROUT FROM SPECIAL PLANTS

seen: a fully functioning bow that projects a virtual landscape onto the surrounding walls. When targets pop up, you pull the string back and fire; the harder the draw, the farther the virtual arrow will fly. *Forget Me Not: My Organic Garden*'s creator, CavyHouse, describes its game as "an avant-garde organic-clicking game". In it, you have to grow and ship human organs, which sprout from special plants. But the most unusual game of TGS 2015 is *Racing Musume*, in which players race girls dressed up as cars around tracks.

**Virtual reality is** a major feature on the TGS landscape, which, for the first time, reaches out across all 11 of Makuhari's halls (even though it could, in truth, be contained in fewer). Sony uses TGS to announce that Project Morpheus's official name is PlayStation VR, though there is no word on release date or pricing. Sony again has the largest showing in this area with demos of a Koei *Musou* game (in which players have to defend a castle from familiar waves of largely nonthreatening attackers) and a VR demo version of *Final Fantasy XIV*.

There are demos, too, intended to show off VR's potential. One offers players a peaceful stroll through a cherry-blossom-flecked Ueno Park in the spring. The other, Joysound VR, puts you in the heels of a J-Pop girl band. During the first half of ▶
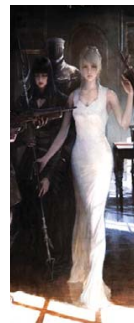
the demo, the band performs at you from a small stage in a somewhat dingy club. Then players hang out with the girls backstage, before performing alongside the group in front of a cheering crowd of fans. Elsewhere, a domed amphitheatre hosts a version of Shirow Masamune's classic anime film Ghost In The Shell, which has been re-rendered in 3D, and is broadcast onto the dome's ceiling, allowing attendees to witness what the virtual reality version will feel like.

As well as Japanese-focused projects and studios, there is a visible presence from a raft of western companies hoping to successfully migrate their services into Japan. Netflix has a screen on the Sony booth (the service launched in Japan earlier in the week), while YouTube Gaming, Twitch and *League Of Legends* have all invested in vast stands, some of which are staffed by women sporting QR codes on their faces.

**In comparison to** the west, the creative middle ground here hasn't been squeezed so much by the pressure of expensive blockbusters on one side and indies on the other. *The King Of Fighters XIV* is given a high-profile slot during Sony's press conference, even if there's no chance it could ever rival the sales of SNK's free-to-play *Metal Slug Defense*, which recently became the company's most profitable title. *Darius Burst: Chronicle Saviors*, the latest entry in Pyramid's aquatic-themed shooter, is also on the show floor, while long-running MMOG *Phantasy Star Online 2* is revealed to be heading to PS4 in 2016.

## "THEY SIT AROUND WAITING FOR THE GOOD OLD DAYS TO COME BACK. IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN"
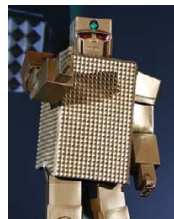




TGS takes its cosplay seriously, with a dedicated 90-minute stage show for top-tier performers (drawn from across the globe) taking place on the Saturday

Nintendo remains conspicuous by its absence, especially since the company's announcement of its collaboration with mobile game goliath DeNA. In recent years the Kyoto-based publisher has become far choosier in terms of the public events it attends, but any show that aims to showcase Japan's brightest development talent can't help but feel incomplete or unrepresentative without Nintendo. The atmosphere is further soured by rumours during the show that Konami is set to cease all console game production apart from its profitable *Pro Evolution Soccer* series, rumours since contradicted by the publisher. Regardless, for some, the supposed move is a reasonable act of adaptation in order to survive. For others, it is merely proof positive that Japan's relevance in the medium is slipping yet further.

Not so, according to **Tak Fujii**, a senior producer who left Konami last year due to ill health. "Too often I've heard colleagues complaining about a lost era," he says. "They blame everything but themselves and show no willingness to shift into new markets. They sit around waiting for the good old golden days to come back. It will never happen." Perhaps not, but at this year's TGS, many companies showed renewed willingness to adapt to the shifting technological and economic sands. Nevertheless, as the final day ends and a tinny keyboard rendition of Auld Lang Syne pipes through the PA system, signalling to the crowds that it is time to leave, the lyrics seem to sound out as a warning as much as a memorial: don't let old acquaintance be forgot. ■

## FINAL FANTASY XV

**Publisher/developer** Square Enix
**Format** PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

There is no playable build at TGS, but a raft of new details nonetheless. The headline? As well as the party's black motor, the Regalia, the world can be traversed on Chocobo back (which handle like racing cars, complete with drifts, and can be called with a whistle). Glimpses of the setting are rich, and the world will offer fishing, plus Chocobo breeding and racing asides. But Moogles are out.

## BEST OF SHOW

**EIGHT PICKS FROM THE TGS 2015 FLOOR**

## DRAGON'S DOGMA ONLINE

**Publisher/developer** Capcom
**Format** PC, PS3, PS4 **Release** Out now (Japan)

Capcom originally believed that *Dragon's Dogma* would struggle to find an audience on PC. Presumably to its great delight, it was swiftly proven wrong. Launched a fortnight before TGS in Japan, this crossplatform F2P multiplayer take on the RPG was downloaded more than a million times in its first ten days, hopefully challenging the company's 'no western release' stance as well.

## GOD EATER RESURRECTION

**Publisher/developer** Bandai Namco
**Format** PS4, Vita **Release** October

An enhanced remake of PSP's fiery action-RPG *God Eater Burst*, *Resurrection* draws once again on the popular manga series. You play as an unemployed warrior battling monsters across more than 100 discrete missions set across Japan in 2071. It also adds Predator Style, which now allows you to devour foes from air, quick or step types of attack.

## STREET FIGHTER V

**Publisher/developer** Capcom
**Format** PS4, PC **Release** Early 2016

Capcom's globe-trotting, character-reveal roadshow lands in Tokyo with Rashid, an Arabian whose attacks are enveloped in whirlwinds, and Karin Kanzuki, the flighty female previously seen in *Street Fighter Alpha 3*. With Zangief and Brazilian newcomer Laura revealed soon after TGS, only two playable characters are still to be announced.

## SAINT SEIYA: SOLDIERS' SOUL

**Publisher** Dimps **Developer** Bandai Namco
**Format** PS3, PS4, PC **Release** September 2015

Based on Masami Kurumada's seminal manga series, which found tremendous popularity in Japan during the mid-to-late 1980s, *Saint Seiya: Soldiers' Soul* is a 3D fighting game that uses period-style characters for its roster. Notably, it's being developed by Dimps, the boutique developer that was partially responsible for *Street Fighter IV*.

## PROJECT X ZONE 2: BRAVE NEW WORLD

**Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Monolith
**Format** 3DS **Release** November 12 (JP), February 2016

Monolith's sequel to crossover tactical-RPG *Project X Zone* again draws together characters from several publishers' vaults. Series as diverse as *Street Fighter*, *Yakuza* and *Fire Emblem: Awakening* are represented in a game that combines strategising with fighting-game-esque showboating.

## FIGUREHEADS

**Publisher/developer** Square Enix
**Format** PC **Release** 2015

Square's five-a-side mech shooter has set its sights on the crowded Japanese freemium market, the model du jour for this style of competitive game. *Figurehead* is aiming to differentiate itself with wingmen to command, Square's respectable *Front Mission* pedigree, and a lot of parts customisation, including the option to dress up your robot's AI.

## PROJECT SETSUNA

**Publisher/developer** Square Enix (Tokyo RPG Factory)
**Format** PS4, Vita **Release** 2016

Tokyo RPG Factory's debut now has a title: *Ikenie To Yuki No Setsuna*. You play as the bodyguard of an 18-year-old with magical abilities on a journey full of active time battles. Her destination? Her own sacrifice. This will apparently appease the monsters that beset this wintery isle every ten years, though they've arrived unseasonably early this time.

# DAVID BREVIK

### SUPER HIGH IMPACT
**Publisher** Acclaim Entertainment (as Arena)  **Developer** Iguana Entertainment  **Format** Mega Drive  **Release** 1992

### JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE
**Publisher** Acclaim Entertainment  **Developer** Condor  **Format** Mega Drive  **Release** 1995

### DIABLO
**Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment (US), Ubisoft (EU)  **Developer** Blizzard North  **Format** PC  **Release** 1996

### DIABLO II
**Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment (US), Sierra Entertainment (EU)
**Developer** Blizzard North  **Format** PC  **Release** 2000

### HELLGATE: LONDON
**Publisher** Electronic Arts  **Developer** Flagship Studios  **Format** PC  **Release** 2007

### MARVEL HEROES
**Publisher/developer** Gazillion Entertainment  **Format** PC  **Release** 2013

Diablo's creator on poor money management, the dangers
of working with licences, and transforming the RPG genre

#### BY BEN MAXWELL

Photography **Daniel Griliopoulos**

There's a mischievous streak to the way **David Brevik** recounts the key moments of his career, one reflected in the decisions he's made along the way. This is the man who reinvigorated the RPG genre with *Diablo* by opting to skip straight to clicking skeletons to death. He also stalled Blizzard for month (prior to joining it) for a fix that took him less than a day to code. While his uneasy relationship with budgets and deadlines has nearly scuppered him on multiple occasions, he delivers each tale with the kind of confident levity that comes from proving himself over and over again. And yet one of gaming's most influential designers only stopped coasting because he got to port an obscure arcade game.

## SUPER HIGH IMPACT

**Publisher** Acclaim Entertainment **Developer** Iguana Entertainment
**Format** Mega Drive **Release** 1992

**"I'd wanted to** make games all my life. I'd come out of college, got my degree in computer science, and worked at a company for a very short time. It went out of business, so I started working at Iguana Entertainment. Iguana eventually went on to make *NBA Jam* for consoles, but before that I worked on a Sega Genesis port of *Super High Impact* football, an arcade game and kind of a precursor to *NBA Jam* but for American football. It wasn't 11 on 11, and you could hit [the players] and their pads would explode… It was ridiculous. I don't think many people know about it, and I don't think it sold super well!

There was a tool that reduced the sprites down and an artist cleaned them up or whatever, but really they were done in a couple of weeks, and so basically I was the only person on the project. It involved converting the assembly language of the arcade machine to the assembly language of the 68000 [processor]. Back then when you made a game for the Sega Genesis or the Super Nintendo, they just handed you the manual for the hardware and said, 'Good luck!' There were no development kits, nothing! You had to write your own assembler, you had to make your own

ABOVE CENTRE *Justice League Task Force* was ultimately responsible for the formation of Blizzard. ABOVE *Diablo* was a shot in the arm for the then-ailing RPG genre, thanks to its action-focused gameplay

devkits, you needed a computer engineer to create things. But there were a few expensive devkits made by a third party for Genesis, and we ended up buying one.

[Iguana] wanted this done in three months. So I started working on it and about a month in, Jeff Spangenberg, who was the company president, said something to me that I'll never forget: 'This project's supposed to be done in three months. This is your opportunity to make games.' Before that — in high school, in college — I barely applied myself. People always said I was under-performing and it was true, because I just didn't care. But he was like, 'This is your chance. It's time to be serious about what you're doing.' And I was like, 'He's right.' So I worked really hard and finished on time and on budget, and it worked great. The publisher, Acclaim, was really excited, because it was one of the first projects they had on time and on budget ever, and so it was a turning point in my career and my life.

After that, Acclaim awarded us another project. But around the same time, in the early '90s, there was an arcade in Sunnyvale called Golfland where Acclaim tested many of the arcade machines. They said, 'OK, we've got this new arcade machine at Sunnyvale you should check out.' So Jeff and I went over and played this machine. I was like, 'Jeff, this game *kicks ass*. We've got to do this.' But he was like, 'Oh, I don't know, this game is really dumb. It's too goofy, too weird.' I told him that I thought he was going to regret it, but he still decided to turn it down. And so we turned down *Mortal Kombat*.

After we turned that down and it was a big hit, a few months later they had another machine. We went there and again I said, 'We've got to do this one. This one's awesome!' And he's like, 'Yeah, I'm not going to make that mistake again…' [Laughs] That was *NBA Jam*."

## JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE

**Publisher** Acclaim Entertainment **Developer** Condor
**Format** Mega Drive **Release** 1995

**"While we were** making *NBA Jam*, Jeff got married and decided to move the company to Texas. I didn't want to move,

so I started my own development company, which I named Condor and which eventually became Blizzard North. I had connections from working at Iguana. I knew Acclaim, and I knew another company called Sunsoft, and through that we were able to get game contracts and have work right off the bat. I formed the company with two artists I'd met along the way, Max and Eric Schaefer.

Sunsoft was trying convince us that we should do the Aerosmith game [*Revolution X*]. But we were sticking to our guns on this one, and wanted to do this DC Comics game called *Justice League Task Force*. It was on the Genesis and was basically a *Street Fighter* clone, but you played as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and Aquaman. We knew very little about fighting games, but this was a real opportunity for us. We created this company, made all of our tools and technology — as well as a code base that we could use in the future — and started making *Justice League*. It was on time, on budget, and everything went well, but it was a new experience working with DC.

We would have to take our hand-drawn animation and sprites, then send the game, video and art assets to DC to be approved. This was kind of a new thing for DC, too — they hadn't done many licensed products at the time, so they were learning as well. One of the batches we sent off while we were working on Superman came back and the notes said, 'Superman can't kick.' Like, what? What does that even mean? You know this is a fighting game, right? There are two things you can do: punch, and kick… They're like, 'Superman doesn't kick in the comics.' We responded, saying, 'Yeah, he does. Here's a bunch of examples!' But they just said, 'We don't care; he no longer kicks going forward.'

That was a harsh lesson about dealing with [others'] IP. It can be wonderful in that you get this audience and passion around a product, and you get to enter that world. But there are also a lot of restrictions to it, and sometimes they don't make sense at all to you, because there is a person on the other end and it is their job to judge your product worthy or not. The inherent problem with this is the person doesn't get in trouble for saying no, so they don't have the motivation to say, 'Oh, this is better for the game' —

their motivation is to make sure that their job is safe, and so they're not taking the risks that they need to take. So we ended up with a game in which Superman doesn't kick, he just punches down or up or whatever. It was weird at the time, because everyone else was kicking, but in hindsight it just doesn't make any sense.

We were working on the Genesis version of the game, but when we showed up at CES — this was before E3 existed and all the developers would go to CES and sit next to the car stereos — lo and behold there's a Super Nintendo version of the game there as well, being developed by a different development company. Neither of us knew about the other one, but the games were strangely similar. That's how Blizzard met: they were Silicon & Synapse, and we were Condor. They became Blizzard, and we became Blizzard North — that game is responsible for Blizzard."

# DIABLO

**Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment (US), Ubisoft (EU) **Developer** Blizzard North **Format** PC **Release** 1996

**"I'd been a** PC game fan for years, and most of what we were playing was on the PC. At the time, they were much deeper. There were so many platformers and things like that on console, so the real nerdy numbers games were on PC. That's where my passions were. I'd wanted to make *Diablo* for a long time — I thought of the idea in high school, and kind of iterated on it. In college, I was influenced by a bunch of Roguelikes that I played, particularly *Rogue* [laughs]. I would play them for hours and hours, and I knew that this was the direction I wanted to go in.

We started pitching *Diablo* once we had a few games under our belt. We would take the pitch, which was five laser-printed sheets of paper in this terrible binder that looked like a fifth-grade book report, and hand it out. We got rejected over and over again, because RPGs were dead; they weren't selling anything. At the time, RPGs were becoming more and more complicated, trying to be more realistic, but fewer people were playing them because they turned out to be less fun.

Silicon & Synapse were working on a PC game when we met them at CES. They

invited us to go and have a look, and so we went over and saw *Warcraft* and they told us they were going to be finishing up that fall. Later, I called up Allen [Adham, Silicon & Synapse co-founder] and said, 'Hey, we've got a game idea I'd love to pitch to you.' And he said, 'OK, right after we're done with *Warcraft*, we'll come out.' And so they flew out in January, we pitched them *Diablo*, they loved it and we signed a contract. It really was my dream game. I had the name already picked out and I was ready to go.

*Diablo* started out as a singleplayer DOS game using, I swear, claymation. One of the things that had really changed for me was that this was my first opportunity to really create something from scratch. A lot of what I'd done before, there had been a lot of set parameters around what I could do. This time, it was more, 'The world is your oyster; go ahead and make it.' But during that process, you realise things aren't going to work like you thought. The claymation resulted in a neat effect, and we were influenced by *Primal Rage*, which used a similar technique. But it turns out it was a big pain in the ass. About two weeks into the claymation, we said, 'Well, this is a really stupid idea.' Instead, we made 3D models, rendered the images, and captured the images at different intervals, then made sprites out of those. It was a much more efficient process than making physical models and doing the same thing!

As development went on, Windows 95 was just emerging, and then DirectX came out. One of the reasons PC gaming wasn't popular was that it was a pain in the ass to run anything — you had to be a computer science expert to get any kind of game working. It made more sense for us not to do DOS and to do DirectX.

But the biggest change was when we switched from turn-based to realtime. It was a really passionate debate in the office. I was sticking to my guns that the tension comes from the decision making when my guy has just a few turns left before he dies and is erased — it was a real Roguelike, by the way, and we erased your character when you died. I'm trapped with only a few hit points left; should I use this potion — which I don't even know what it is yet — and hope that it's a health potion? Or is it something terrible? All these kinds of things. ▶

Turns out that doesn't go over very well with modern sensibilities; people don't like losing their character and all their hard work very much. But anyway, we debated this for a while, and I gave in and said we can try realtime, since I'd been thinking about it and didn't think it would be that difficult to give it a go. Though I really played it up to Blizzard — because we weren't part of Blizzard at the time — and said, 'We're going to give it a try, but it's going to take us a month to do this…' Then I coded it up in a day!

I can still remember the moment I tried it. I was this warrior; there was this skeleton on the other side of the screen. I clicked on the skeleton, I walked over, smashed it, it fell on the ground, and it was just like you would imagine it would be: beams of light came through the clouds, the angels sang, and it was like, 'Oh my God. Something special's just happened here. We're not going back. I was wrong; this is the way to go.'

We knew then that this was something very different. One of the things that we were trying to get with *Diablo* was ease of gaming. The *NHL* series was really good at this, where you just click and you're in the game. Before *Diablo*, when you created a character, you had to answer 53 questions about this that and the other; you had to name it, give it a backstory and so on. We just wanted to get in and start smashing things. That pace was something we wanted all through the game, and so it was easy to see this was a better way to go.

Six months before the end of *Diablo*, we thought of Battle.net, and decided to make it and add multiplayer. We had some help from the people down south in Irvine. A couple of the guys moved up and lived in Northern California for six months and helped us do all the networking and things like that. *Diablo* was my very first C program ever, and I didn't know anything about networking, but they'd done networking stuff for *Warcraft I* and *II*, so they had some expertise.

It was peer-to-peer when we launched it and we thought that there would be a small number of people who would want to hack and ruin their game, which was no big deal. Then the hacks went up on a website and we were like, 'Oh yeah, people can just download them now…' It was no longer a case of passing them around the old way on some bulletin board system where only four people knew about it. Almost instantly everybody had cheats for everything, and that was one of the biggest lessons we learned: if we're going to do this, we've got to make it secure."

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## DIABLO II
**Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment (US), Sierra Entertainment (EU)
**Developer** Blizzard North **Format** PC **Release** 2000

"**After *Diablo*, we** were in a rush to make *Diablo II*, but we were a little burnt out. My second child was born three days after *Diablo* launched, and that last six months of putting in the networking code and all that, then delaying it and missing Christmas — which was a big deal — was a stressful time. We thought we'd missed our chance, and we didn't know if it was going to sell. We hoped we'd sell 50,000 copies. Then we'd be golden. But it did all right in the end [laughs]. We didn't know if we want to go through it again, but a few months after the launch, we found a bunch of stuff we wanted to fix.

By this point, the cheating was rampant, so I really wanted to make a secure version. I was sick of walking around town; I wanted to be able to run. And everybody keeps talking about this hidden cow level, so let's put one of those in! We kind of started to get excited about the idea of doing this project. And some of the other ideas we had just weren't fleshed out enough, so we decided to go back and make a sequel.

We redid so much of the technology. There was a big debate whether to make it 3D or not, because 3D games were just emerging. In the end, we decided not to make it 3D, and we also decided not to make it 24bit colour and just stick with 8bit colour because of speed. One of the guys down south, Mike O'Brien, who later went on to found ArenaNet, made this palette-optimising program that allowed us to make it look like 24bit even though it only had 256 colours.

Development started really well, and we knew it was going to be a great game. We had a lot of support, and things were easier on the company in general, because we had *StarCraft*, *Warcraft*, *Warcraft II* and *Diablo* out there — we had three years to work on the game and it felt like we could take our time. About six to seven months before the end, we thought, 'Wow, we've got a lot left to do. We still haven't finished act three, and we have another act after that. We should probably start crunching…' And so we started working pretty much every day, averaging maybe 14-hour days.

When you're that close to something, you can't see how far you have to go, and about a month before we thought it would be done — we were aiming for Thanksgiving — they said, 'You're not going to make it.' We were like, 'No, no, we're going to make it, we swear!' As we got closer, we realised that wasn't the case and aimed for February instead, and kept the crunch going all the way through. Then February wasn't happening, and it kept going all the way to May. So during that period of time, I basically crunched for an entire year, with three days off.

Then *Diablo II* came out, and it was not super well received. There were a lot of problems: there were technical problems, server problems, duping problems — all these things that people found, because thousands of people find bugs a lot faster than a couple hundred. We scrambled even though we were exhausted and burnt out, and it was a nightmare. Things eased up a bit after that and we were able to fix some of the bugs and whatnot, and then start on the expansion. After the expansion, which fixed a lot of things, it was in good enough shape that we could start putting in a lot of important additions. After the 1.10 patch, which was released a year later, that's really when *Diablo II* became what *Diablo II* is today. People don't realise that it took two years after *Diablo II* was released to make *Diablo II*.

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## HELLGATE: LONDON
**Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Flagship Studios
**Format** PC **Release** 2007

"**We were working** on a project nicknamed *Starblo* for six to eight months at Blizzard North before we left, but it never came to fruition.

I wanted to make a kind of sci-fi version of *Diablo* and, even though playing them makes me feel sick, I love firstperson

shooters. FPS makes sense for a sci-fi [setting]. I wanted to move the FPS genre forward by putting RPG elements in it. Not just RPG, but random RPG. I wanted that mix of random items, random monsters and random layouts mixed in with the action of a firstperson shooter. That was my pitch to the team, and everybody liked it.

I'm really proud of the game that we made in the end. [*Hellgate*] was flawed, just as flawed as *Diablo II* was — maybe more so — but it ended up breaking even. The hype was really, really high, and it didn't really live up to those expectations, because there were a lot of bugs.

We signed a deal with Namco to be the publisher, and about six months afterwards all those people [we dealt with] were gone. Namco were like, 'We don't know anything about this; we don't make PC games; we're not sure where you fit in our portfolio. We'll honour our agreement, but good luck!' [And we had to say,] 'OK, so that's not going to work out.'

We didn't have enough money to complete the project, so we created a networking company with another Korean company called Hanbitsoft. And so the networking was kind of like Battle.net, and it was called Pingo. So we had that group, which was a separate company, but we needed a publisher and a distributor for the game, and so we [also] signed with EA. Then we had deals with Microsoft for DirectX stuff, then Havoc for physics, and like 18 vendors of joysticks — all sorts of crap we had to support as a result of signing all these deals. In the end, we did 8,000 jobs, and had all these vendors pulling us in different directions. We focused on the wrong things. Instead of focusing on making a great product, we had to service these 27 different masters, and it created chaos.

Also, we were going from a situation where [we'd been part of a company that] had made *Warcraft*, *Warcraft II*, *Diablo*, *StarCraft II* — just hit after hit — where you could afford to take your time. We had always been doing our best for the project; we kind of forgot how to manage time and money. So we're getting towards the end, running out of money, and no one's going to give us any more. And so we worked and we released it even though we knew it wasn't ready.



## "PEOPLE DON'T REALISE THAT IT TOOK TWO YEARS AFTER DIABLO II WAS RELEASED TO MAKE DIABLO II"





ABOVE CENTRE *Diablo II* is a classic, but it suffered from problems at launch. ABOVE + MAIN **Action-RPG** *Hellgate: London* cribbed ideas from Roguelikes, randomising its drops and levels. It can be played in first- or thirdperson

We had it 'easy' at Blizzard eventually, because of our success in the past. The first games were a lot of work and we worked really hard to get those things done. There were deadlines and we met most of them. But since we had success, we could afford more time. But coming from a culture where we could have time as we needed to where that wasn't a reality was kind of a shellshock in a lot of ways. And we did a poor job with that.

But in the end I think that *Hellgate* was a little ahead of its time. That game [we wanted to make] is still going to exist someday — there will be the firstperson shooter with the randomness and depth of a *Diablo*. *Borderlands* kind of comes close, they did a good job with that, but I still don't think anybody's found the exact formula yet. But somebody will. Trying to make something brand new where there isn't another example out there is a difficult thing to do, and sometimes you succeed and sometimes you don't. I thought that we succeeded in many ways, but in the end the game wasn't ready and we had way too many masters. Those were tough lessons to learn.

## MARVEL HEROES
**Publisher/developer** Gazillion Entertainment
**Format** PC **Release** 2013

**"I knew I** wanted to make a *Diablo*-like game again. But I didn't want to do fantasy; I wanted to do something different that would stretch my limits. I'd been a big Marvel fan for a long time, and I always wanted to make a Marvel *Diablo*. We'd been working on a design for *Diablo III* and an MMOG project called *Mythos* at Flagship Studios, which never saw the light of day. The original design for *Diablo II* was massively multiplayer, too. I love massively multiplayer games in all different forms, from *Ultima Online* to *EverQuest*, and here was an opportunity to combine all the things I love. It was just something I couldn't pass up, since I was too excited about it, and that's what I'm working on today.

I joined Gazillion as creative director on the project, and at the time it was running into a similar situation to *Hellgate*. Gazillion was a big company, ▶

it had like 450 to 500 people, and it had a lot of different projects going on — seven or eight. Then it all started to kind of fall apart. They'd raised a ton of money from investors, games were coming out and not making any money, and other projects were getting delayed.

So they kicked out the CEO, brought in another one and made me president and COO. So myself and the other CEO reduced the company down to a few projects, but nothing was really working. *Marvel Heroes* looked like it had a lot of potential, but it was hard for me to pay attention to it because I was so focused on the corporate stuff — board and investor politics, all of these other things that I was kind of new to. I'd never worked with investors before; mostly we'd just do publisher-developer deals, and at Blizzard we'd always made enough revenue to fund our own things. Investors that deal with games alongside investing in, say, medical equipment or some Internet startup or whatever, they don't know all that much about videogames. They just know about Marvel and so they think, 'Oh, Marvel. A licence. That should be a good investment.'

So we made that game. About six months before finishing, the CEO left, so they made me CEO. We were running out of cash and the investors weren't going to give us any more — the company had been around for seven or eight years by that point, and they'd put a lot of money in and not seen much return. They weren't going to put more in before we'd released something. So we released *Marvel Heroes* before it was ready.

It came out, and it was not well received. It got a Metacritic of 58. And it was like, 'Oh my God. I can't believe I've gone through this yet again.' I didn't want to be the business man. I wanted to be the guy who was focused on making games again, not having to deal with that stuff. But the only way to have that project see the light of day was to become more and more involved with the business side of things. But the investors were happy that we released something, and said, 'You know what? We're going to support you a little bit more. We'll give you guys the leg room to make this thing grow.'

So they put a little bit more capital in and with that we were able to start

"THE PROCESS OPENED MY EYES TO THE WAY GAMES ARE MADE NOW, AND HOW IMPORTANT COMMUNITY IS"



ABOVE CENTRE *Marvel Super Heroes* is, like *Diablo*, an isometric action-RPG, but Brevik has shifted focus to an MMO F2P structure. ABOVE Despite painful past experience with licensing, Brevik couldn't turn down Marvel Comics characters

working on the project, making it better and better. We worked on it very hard, lots of crunching hours, although the crunch was a lot better this time, because we were using a Scrum development system where people were estimating their time. These games as a service are a marathon, not a sprint, and I didn't want people burnt out the entire time. It's OK to crunch for short periods of time, but you can't crunch for a year and expect that to keep going for another year.

We brought a couple of key people on and really turned it around. We added more features, finished the game — it took maybe nine months or so to make it the game that we really wanted it to be at release. And that process opened my eyes to the way games are made now, and how important community is. Interaction with the community in today's day and age is very different to 25 years ago when I started in the industry — back then, there weren't even message boards for a lot of games. Your communication was picking up Nintendo Power and talking among your friends. Today, there are forums, there's Twitter, there's Twitch: all these different communities that it's important for a developer, especially of an online service game, to be interacting with.

Its an amazing transformation. Going from this standoffish developer separate from the community and not really interacting with them to opening up and fully embracing them. Everybody in the entire company can post on the forums — I don't care what position you have, you can chat with the customers. People are answering questions on Twitter at any given moment. I personally stream the game three or four nights a week with my own account. I listen to and answer questions. I go out and onto other people's streams to chat and play with them. This new way of developing a live product is the most fun I've ever had.

I've enjoyed making *Marvel Heroes* almost more than any other game ever, simply because of the post-release [process] and the improvements we've made. It took two years to make *Diablo II* great, and I think it's taken a couple of years to make *Marvel Heroes* great, and I really enjoy that interaction with the community. I know this is the way I want to make games in the future." ∎

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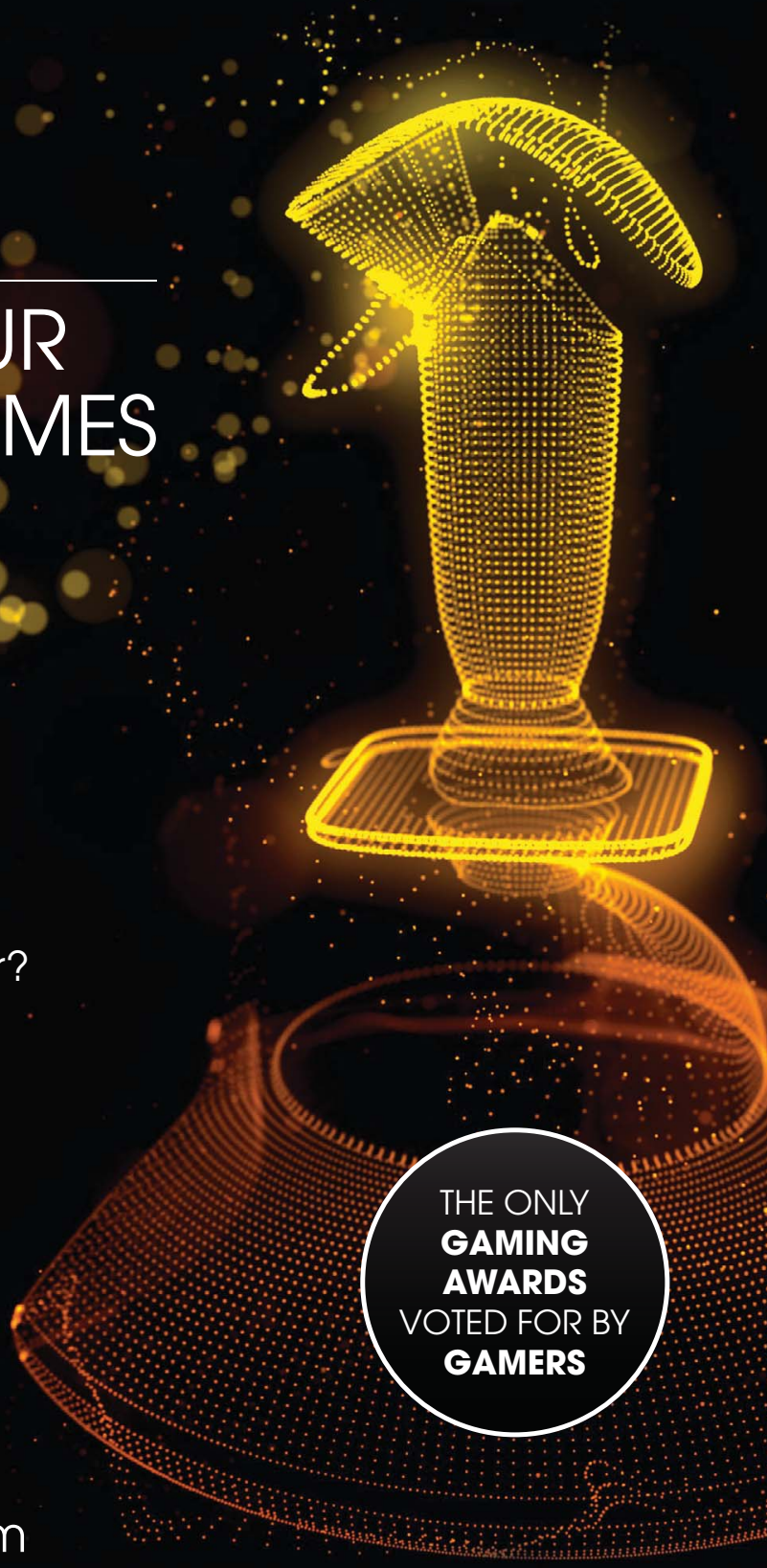
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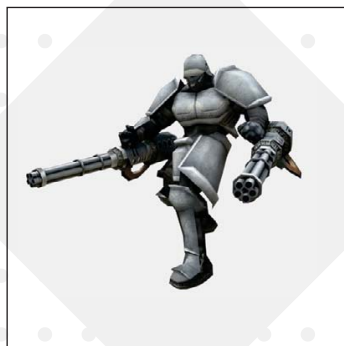


# KILL SWITCH

How a low-profile Namco game launched the cover
shooter and paved the way for Gears Of War

BY TRISTAN DONOVAN

**Format** PS2, Xbox
**Publisher/developer** Namco (Hometek)
**Origin** US
**Debut** 2003

The year is 2002 and time is short for Namco Hometek. The publisher's bosses have given the San Jose studio carte blanche to make a military shooter, but the team is struggling to find the right idea. And now the deadline for starting development is bearing down fast.

Hometek had first toyed with ideas for a Vietnam-themed firstperson shooter, but felt that it wouldn't sell. Then there was a ninja shooter concept. "I wanted to go down this ninja warrior shooter route," remembers *Kill Switch* producer **Chris Esaki**. "I wanted the character to run with the gun trailing behind him kind of like a sword. I was really taken with this notion, but of course the team shot that down."

With the pressure mounting, Esaki and lead producer **Matt Sentell** retreated to the studio's uninspiring conference room, with its dismal view of a San Jose industrial park and sad-looking ficus tree in a corner. "It was the most non-creative space you can imagine," Sentell says. "We had a lounge that was much more relaxing and creative, but for some reason we weren't using it that day. The pressure was building to figure out what our next game would be, so I guess we didn't feel like relaxing."

As the pair bounced ideas around and supped their coffees, the spark that would become the basis of *Kill Switch* and the blueprint for the cover-based shooters of today emerged. "I still remember sitting in the conference room and talking about what kind of shooter we wanted to make," Sentell says. "I was talking about this aspiration of wanting these things [such as] conforming to the cover and playing a little bit of hide and seek, while still being a fast-paced shooter. Chris came up, very quickly, with these ideas about how to make it work with the controls – the notion of grabbing hold of the environment and then holding the left trigger and moving along the cover. I was like, 'Yeah, this is going to be cool.'"

Back then, most shooters paid scant attention to players taking cover, which was more a feature of stealth games. "We started thinking about the nature of shooters at the time and how to do something different from a very mechanical level," Esaki says. "The player's relationship to the environment wasn't really exploited too well. The only other titles were like *Metal Gear Solid*, where you can take cover on walls, but it was a stealth system rather than a shooter system."



*Kill Switch*'s focus on cover grew out of the team's desire to avoid the strafing and unrealistic firefights of other games

Workplace bouts of Novalogic's tactical firstperson shooter *Delta Force 2* further seeded the sense that cover was neglected. "We all were playing that after work when we were having the debate about cover and first- or thirdperson," Esaki says. "I remember very vividly

## "I WANTED THIS FEELING THAT YOU'RE GRABBING ONTO SOMETHING SAFE AND HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE"

getting headshotted when I thought I was behind a piece of cover, but it was clear in the replay afterwards that my head was above the piece of stone. I couldn't tell, and that was the reason why we went thirdperson with *Kill Switch*."

With animator Vince Joly, Esaki began prototyping how a cover-based thirdperson shooter would work. "We did these almost stick-figure-ish poses and visualisations of what we could do with cover, and that's where the whole chest-high cover pieces came from, and the whole notion of blindfire and blind throwing grenades," Esaki explains. "It made sense to me and the team. It wasn't this videogame abstraction of a shooting experience. It was more, 'This is how you would actually approach a firefight,' and this notion that bullets are really lethal. It wasn't a stroke of genius by any means – it was really understanding what we thought was natural via gameplay."

To reinforce the role of cover, Esaki drew on his childhood experience. "I came up with this concept of cover as a safety blanket," he says. "As a kid, I had a little blue blankie and, much like [Peanuts'] Linus, I carried it around with me and would cry if my blanket was taken away. That's what I was trying to get to with how the cover was implemented in *Kill Switch*, so that you have this feeling that you're grabbing onto something safe and holding on for dear life."

**The controls, which** required players to hold down the left trigger to stay in cover, flowed from this vision of cover as protector, even if the results were uncomfortable. "If you played *Kill Switch* for any extended period, you'd get these cramps in your left hand because you were holding that button down the whole time," Esaki says. "That was intended. I wanted that to be a psychological cornerstone of the whole experience. You are physically holding onto this thing, and if you let go, you feel like you are letting go of your safety blanket."

It wasn't just the controls. Almost every aspect of *Kill Switch* flowed from the core cover shooter idea. But this was virgin territory and, with no blueprint to follow, the team spent five to six months of its nine-month production schedule tuning the mechanic.

"We had this thing at Namco where if you were a programmer, artist or designer at Namco in Japan, you could spend time in the United States office," Esaki says. "Our mechanics programmer, Dai Matsumoto, came from the *Mr Driller* team of all things. He didn't speak very much English but, damn, that guy was good. He put all the mechanics together. I remember Matt and myself sitting with him for forever, tuning every little thing from the camera to the transition in and out of cover to how the angles would change for general aiming. It was a process of refinement over months and months."

Getting the artificial intelligence right was also crucial, Sentell says: "The gaming experience relied tremendously on the AI being able to do all of the same things that the player could do. Because of the cover, the more traditional shooter AI just didn't work. We started building it that way and it just didn't work, because you can get into cover and not move for a long time. The AI took a lot more effort to get right than the player control did. We ended up with an AI that falls somewhere ▶

in between a stealth game and a shooter, where they have line of sight and a memory of where they last saw you.

"If an enemy sees you're aiming near them, they will very often drop down behind cover and very often decide to move to another position. Or he may instead decide to blindfire and then pop up, because the blindfire causes the player to drop behind cover. So he's assuming that if he blindfires at you and then pops up, he'll be clear to shoot. There's a ton of stuff going on in that AI. At least when we shipped the game, I don't think there was anything else like it. I went on to work on other shooters after *Kill Switch* at places like EA, and never saw an AI that was anywhere close to as good as that."

As the pieces fell into place, the 30-strong team became convinced it had hit on something special with the cover system. But it wasn't always confident: five months into development, doubts about the game crept in and it entered a phase that Sentell calls "the dark days". As he explains: "The game started with this idea about the moment-to-moment gameplay; there was no idea at all about who you were, who you are fighting, and where this takes place. We didn't have anyone on the team who was experienced in doing that. We were coming off of doing *Pac-Man World 2*. It was a very tortuous period of trying to figure out all these questions."

**Namco's executives and** marketing team also had their doubts. "From the executive and marketing side it was, 'Yeah, this is cool, but it's kind of a one-trick pony,'" Sentell says. "We were like, 'Yeah, but it's a really cool trick.'"

The task of answering the question marks over the setting and the player's purpose fell to Alvin Muolic, a producer and designer (*Army Men II*, *Dead To Rights*) who served as *Kill Switch*'s writer. But with a tight $3 million budget at a time when $20 million for a triple-A game was commonplace, there wasn't much money spare for storytelling. "We had a budget for cinematics and it was not too much, so what I wanted to do was reuse as much of that video as possible," Esaki laughs. "We thought that we would go with a kind of Memento storytelling, where there's a story that is chopped up, and bits and pieces are revealed over time."

Muolic's story cast the player's character, Nick Bishop, as an amnesic soldier being remotely controlled for nefarious ends by a man known

## Q&A

**Chris Esaki**
Producer

**Was there a clear moment during the development process when you realised what you had hit on with *Kill Switch*?**
The first time I blindfired. It was very Hollywood. It didn't really do anything, but it made the players feel better, or it scared the enemy, and no one had done that before. The first time we had that in the game was like, "Oh, this is really fricking cool – you've got to see this." You don't have a lot of those moments in the industry where it's like, "Everyone frigging come and check this out."

**Did the Iraq War, which started during development, influence the Middle Eastern setting for the game?**
Absolutely. Around the time [Saddam Hussein's sons] Uday and Qusay were killed, one of the voice actors did this outtake that was like this great George W Bush impression: "We got Uday and we got Qusay. We killed them and then we switched them." It was on everybody's psyche – the war in Iraq that has never fricking ended. It made a lot of sense for the game.

**Did the team try to develop the cover shooter concept after *Kill Switch*?**
We had a concept for this game that had cover on two scales – you run around the world taking cover on human-sized objects, but then get into a mech and take cover on buildings. I imagined blindfiring around a skyscraper as a mech. But our time had run out. Namco was in merger talks with Bandai [at the time], and Bandai was going to release a Gundam game, so to them it was, 'Why would we want another robot game?'

only as the Controller. As the game progresses, the cutscenes tell the story of Bishop regaining his memories and breaking free of the Controller, while playing with the notion of the fourth wall and videogame storytelling in general. "On the surface, it might seem like just another generic shooter," Sentell says, "but if you play it and go through the story, it's not."

The story wasn't the only aspect of *Kill Switch* that felt the impact of the tight budget and a nine-month crunch development schedule that had its staff working 12 to 16 hour days, six or seven days a week. "To be honest, *Kill Switch* didn't have a lot to hang its hat on other than the cover mechanic," Esaki says. "It wasn't a great story,

but it was a decent, interesting story. It didn't have great production values. The animation wasn't fantastic, because we didn't have the time or the resources, but it was great for what it was. We didn't have multiplayer. We, of course, wanted all those things."

On its American release in October 2003, *Kill Switch* gained mildly positive reviews and did reasonably well. Esaki estimates that his game sold somewhere in the region of 300,000 to 500,000 copies – enough to earn back its costs and make some profit, but too little to establish it as an ongoing series.

But while *Kill Switch* itself was only a modest success, the cover shooter blueprint it created would go on to find fame elsewhere. Three years later, *Gears Of War* took the concept and turned it into a system-selling point.

"The story is that [*Gears*' lead level designer] Lee Perry played *Kill Switch*, then showed it to [lead designer] Cliff Bleszinski and he was like, 'Yeah, we need to do this; this is what we need in our game,'" says Esaki, who by then had moved to Microsoft and was working as the design director on *Gears*. "It was a really straightforward shooter when it was initially pitched. It was more like, 'We have this really good tech, and we want to do a sci-fi shooter like *Unreal*.' But when they finally pitched the game, they had solidified down on, 'We're using *Kill Switch* as the core combat mechanic and it has a theme of *Resident Evil* – this horror version of *Kill Switch*.'"

*Gears* also drew inspiration from *Kill Switch*'s AI. "Ray Davis was the lead programmer on *Gears* and he did all the AI work," Esaki says. "We had a lunch where I detailed how the system for *Kill Switch* worked. He took that to heart and created what is now the basis for *Gears*' AI – it's all based on similar principles."

After Epic's huge success with *Gears*, the cover mechanic spread rapidly, finding its way into series and games as diverse as *Uncharted*, *Mass Effect*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*. "I do wonder what would be if we hadn't come out with *Kill Switch* and *Gears* wasn't influenced by it," Esaki says. "Would *Gears* have been as successful as it was? Would *Uncharted* have had cover? Certainly *Mass Effect* would not have had cover."

*Kill Switch*'s enduring influence is gratifying to Sentell. "It's something not many people get to do in their career," he says. "To feel like they invented a subgenre within the game industry." ■
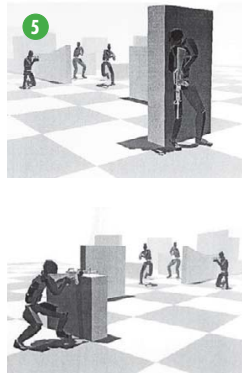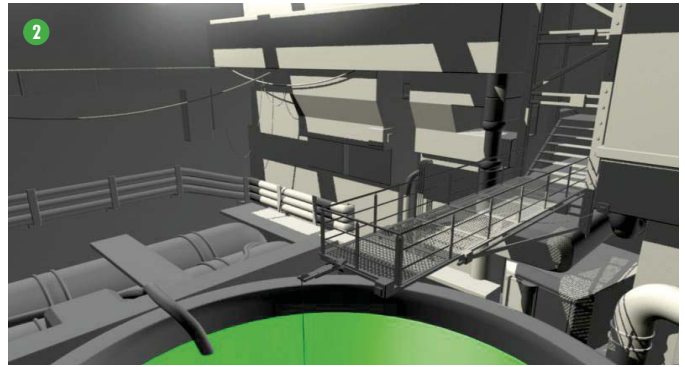
❶ The game was originally set during the Vietnam War, and had the working title *Loose Cannon*.
❷ A mockup of the game's final arena, where the player takes on the main bad guy, Archer.
❸ The eventually scrapped 'Hanoi Hilton' level was based on the notorious Vietnamese prison.
❹ Getting *Kill Switch*'s enemies to use cover like the player was a big AI challenge for the team.
❺ These gameplay prototypes helped Hometek work out how cover would work in practice.
❻ Jet Girl was culled when the team settled on its scenario, as was the minigunner that features on the opening page

# RONIMO GAMES

Why everything is awesome
for this tight-knit Dutch studio

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

R onimo released *Awesomenauts* in 2012, and yet everyone at the studio – that's 15 full-time staff and three interns – is still working on it. That in itself is unusual, but it's particularly extraordinary for a game that looked like it might never come out. As late as its launch week, its fate was still in doubt. Rumours had been spreading that the game's publisher, DTP Entertainment, was in grave financial trouble, and an official announcement on April 30 confirmed that the German company had been forced to declare bankruptcy. The planned release date for *Awesomenauts*? May 2.

Recent precedent had Ronimo alarmed. "Around that time, Midway had pulled all its Xbox 360 games from the store," says **Joost Van Dongen**, one of the studio's founders. "So almost up until launch, we really didn't know whether or not the game was going to make it."

It was a particularly sobering period, since Ronimo had been working on *Awesomenauts* for roughly three years – two years longer than planned. The studio's perfectionist streak may have eventually paid off, but all that effort was one swipe of an administrator's pen away from being wasted. Not that the threat of insolvency was a new concept to Ronimo; having budgeted for a much shorter development, it had already come dangerously close to the wire. "We were a month away from going bankrupt," says artist and co-founder **Olivier Thijssen**. "Twice," says Van Dongen, with a wry chuckle.

**These were chastening** times for the close-knit group, which still boasts five of the same team that formed when its founder members were still students of Game Design And Development at the Utrecht School Of The Arts. Working alongside four others from the same course, they drew inspiration from the ongoing development of the Dutch city to create a final-year project that was then released as freeware PC game *De Blob*. A bright and inventive platformer, it was so well regarded that the titular character was soon adopted as the official city mascot of Utrecht. The game also attracted the attention of THQ, which bought the publishing rights from the students, before enlisting Blue Tongue Entertainment and Helixe to develop it for Wii and DS respectively.

Meanwhile, four of the original group departed, with the five remaining members recruiting two more staff and using their share of the THQ money to form Ronimo Games (a contraction of "robot ninja monkey"). Despite the success of *De Blob*, which eventually spawned a
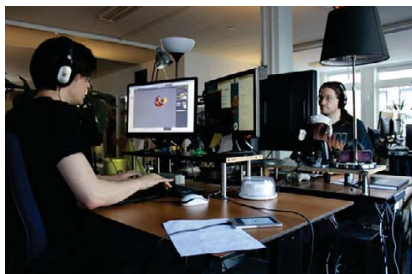


Ronimo has a careful recruitment policy. Many of those who've joined the original seven began as studio interns

sequel, Van Dongen says the studio has no regrets. "We didn't have any plans for it," he says. "We were just students, and we could never really have [expanded] the game like Blue Tongue did. They made a great game out of it."

Van Dongen is similarly modest about the studio's next prototype, a 3D action-platformer "in the vein of *Ratchet & Clank*" called *Snowball Earth*. Designed around a mechanic that had the player melting their surrounding environment to progress, the project eventually had to be shelved

even the main feature, but the end credits", says Van Dongen) *Swords & Soldiers* was conceived as a more accessible brand of realtime strategy. *StarCraft* was a popular game among the team, but Ronimo considered it too daunting as a competitive pursuit, citing the ability of top players to reach 300 clicks per minute. 2D Boy's *World Of Goo* was a strong influence, too, not only for its breadth of ideas and its pacing, but also because its popularity had suggested there was a big enough market for downloadable games on Wii for *Swords & Soldiers* to flourish.

As would be the case with *Awesomenauts*, the game took longer than expected to finish, but after a year it launched to critical praise and

# "ALMOST UP UNTIL LAUNCH, WE REALLY DIDN'T KNOW WHETHER OR NOT AWESOMENAUTS WAS GOING TO MAKE IT"

after a year's worth of work. During that time, Ronimo pitched *Snowball Earth* to several publishers, and while many were impressed by its ideas, none of them were willing to commit the money to make it. The game may have been a victim of unfortunate timing, coming just before Xbox Live Arcade and then PlayStation Network took off as distribution platforms for independent developers, though Thijssen believes the plans were simply too ambitious. "Think of all the good games in that genre that indie studios have released," he says, before doing just that and eventually coming up with a lone example: Twisted Pixel's *The Maw*. "That's the sort of scale we were aiming for – we just didn't have the manpower or know-how to do it justice." Van Dongen takes it a step further: "If we'd tried to make it, I'm not sure we'd have survived."

Something smaller and simpler was required. Those early publisher meetings had allowed Ronimo to obtain a devkit from Nintendo, and it quickly began working on a game for Wii. With a look inspired by a French animation short, ("not

moderate sales, reaching second place on the WiiWare charts. It was enough to sustain a small team for a little while and, happily, ports to PC and iOS fared rather better.

Five years later, it was time for a sequel. Ronimo again opted to debut on a Nintendo platform, albeit for very different reasons. With hindsight, it's easy to say the studio backed the wrong horse, but when *Swords & Soldiers II* was conceived, few would have predicted Wii U's struggles. Besides, the game was built around an idea that wouldn't have worked on another system without compromise: the ability to use two separate displays meant each player could hide their scheming from the other. "That kind of two-screen strategy hadn't really been done before [in a local multiplayer context]," Van Dongen says. Again, the result was polished, generous and packed with personality, but while the original eventually made it to a vast host of formats, it seems likely that its follow-up will remain a Wii U exclusive. Could it not be modified to work on PC, a platform upon ▶

**Van Dongen was Ronimo's only programmer when the studio was founded, though that's no longer the case. While having more coders has accelerated its processes, maintaining the delicate equilibrium of a competitive game such as *Awesomenauts* is an ongoing challenge**

which Ronimo has built a loyal following? Van Dongen isn't convinced. "Back when we released [*Swords & Soldiers*] on PC, there were a few new games on Steam per week. These days, you can get like 70 games, and only one or two can stand out. There's a lot of indies out there struggling to be seen. There's going to be some kind of shakedown at some stage."

While *Swords & Soldiers II* again earned favourable reviews, its champions were notably fewer in number. "There are simply so many games out there these days that not all of them will be covered," Van Dongen concedes.

**Ronimo's decision to** focus on a game with an established and consistent playerbase, then, seems an eminently sensible one. And yet even the studio admits that *Awesomenauts* never looked like lasting this long. Its troubles at launch saw it attract publicity of the wrong kind, though Ronimo's high standards once again won over critics. But even with its name in headlines, *Awesomenauts* was the archetypal slow burner, reaching a small audience while rarely looking like a bona fide hit, or even hinting that it would eventually end up with a tail three years long.

In many respects, it was ahead of its time. Its Steam blurb describes it as a "three-on-three action platformer". Elsewhere, it's been labelled "a side-scrolling RTS". These days, it's viewed as a MOBA, of course, though the term wasn't widely known in 2012. *Awesomenauts* arrived just as the genre was becoming a phenomenon; indeed, a year into development, Ronimo met with the then-unknown Riot Games at an event to play a prerelease version of *League Of Legends*. "We beat them at their own game," Van Dongen laughs, although play was secondary to a lengthy discussion about the game and its genre. Ronimo had by then created a working prototype of its own, which threw elements of a well-known

multiplayer shooter into the mix. ("Our working title was *Battlefield Of The Ancients*," Thijssen tells us.) And yet Ronimo realised it wouldn't do to ape *DOTA* and *LOL* – rather, it wanted to try something that would set it apart from its peers. In the end, it adopted a similar design ethos to *Swords & Soldiers*, taking a familiar idea and making it more accessible.

Though Xbox Live and PSN had begun to hit their peak as distribution platforms, it wasn't until three months later and its PC launch that *Awesomenauts*' sales started to pick up. Buoyed by coverage from a clutch of popular YouTube channels, the playerbase started to grow. "In the early [weeks], we had between 300 and 400

concurrent players," Thijssen tells us. These days, he says, it averages at around 1,000. Realising it owed a debt to the personalities that raised its profile, Ronimo returned the favour: Yogscast's Simon Lane and John 'Totalbiscuit' Bain were invited to voice new characters. But a lot of new faces have been added: *Awesomenauts* launched with just six playable characters, and the roster has now swelled to 23, including a 1930s mobster riding a three-eyed mutant fish, and a crab-piloted mech that shoots ghostly cats.

It's needed a little help to reach this stage, of course. The studio is still forced to pay a representative for DTP Entertainment half the profits from every copy it sells, so it's no surprise it should seek alternative funding – a difficult situation hardly helped by the need to absorb the cost of spending three years making *Swords &*

*Soldiers II*. In late 2013, it opted to launch a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter, asking for $125,000 to fund a substantial expansion called *Awesomenauts: Starstorm*. Factoring in PayPal donations, it eventually quadrupled its original target, which enabled Ronimo to also add replays and a spectator mode.

Expanding an existing game is almost as involving and time-consuming as building a new one, particularly for a studio that isn't prepared to compromise on quality. Ronimo is coy about plans for the future, but it seems like a sequel isn't likely any time soon: with a satisfied playerbase, the worst thing to do would be to fragment it. "We never thought we'd work on a game for this

## "THERE'S A LOT OF INDIES STRUGGLING TO BE SEEN. THERE'S GOING TO BE SOME KIND OF SHAKEDOWN AT SOME STAGE"

long," Thijssen admits, "[but] everyone's still really excited to be working on *Awesomenauts*."

While the game continues to grow, the studio probably won't get bigger, either. Van Dongen says Ronimo is "the perfect size"; any more staff, and that sense of togetherness that pushed it through its toughest times might be at risk. And besides, it could disturb a delightful tradition: this is a group that always finds time to sit down and eat lunch together, sometimes sharing game ideas, but often discussing non-work subjects too.

Though in some respects it's a pity Ronimo won't be pursuing new projects for a while, it's hard to begrudge its focus. After a stressful few years, this hard-working team has finally found itself in a more comfortable position. "It's been difficult at times," Van Dongen says, "but now we can look back at it and laugh." ∎

**1** Ronimo originally planned for just two tribes in *Swords & Soldiers*: Vikings and Aztecs. The third faction, the Imperial Chinese, are considered to be the most challenging to learn. **2** *Swords & Soldiers II* pits the Vikings against Persians and Demons. Its animations and art are a huge upgrade. **3** *Awesomenauts* has a low base cost and offers an array of microtransactions for purely cosmetic additions, from new skins to announcer variants

# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

# As time goes by

Nostalgia is a perilous vein to tap. Get it right and the results can be potent, but miss the mark and you risk souring the memory of something many hold dear. With its G1 bots and shimmering cel-shaded visuals, PlatinumGames' *Transformers: Devastation* (p114) makes a Bumblebeeline for '80s childhood memories – especially those of purists still simmering over offshoots such as Rescue Bots and Michael Bay's loud, juddering interpretation of the universe – and delivers big-hearted fan service in the process.

Frictional's latest horror game, *Soma* (p110), also trades on 20th century pop-culture references, with a clear affection for the Alien movies. However, its combination of body horror and rescue mission gone awry slithers underneath the surface layer of this sci-fi adventure's deep-sea setting, Frictional spinning its own distinctive take on a familiar situation to yield something that feels unique.

But it's not necessary to reach back a full three decades to benefit from past glories. This month, Harmonix returns to peripheral-heavy rhythm action in *Rock Band 4* (p116) after the series' five-year hiatus, and proves that it was worth getting the band back together. Teaming up with friends to jam on plastic instruments remains as inherently silly as it ever was, but just as much fun, too.

If only *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5* (p118) could have pulled off its comeback so convincingly. Developer Robomodo set out to write the likes of *Underground* and *American Wasteland* out of history, but if you're going to include a level called School III, you'd better have the chops to back it up. Despite all the talk, *Pro Skater 5* bails spectacularly.

Rekindling old flames is always risky, then, but the opportunity to revisit cherished memories in new ways is surely worth the risk of occasionally falling flat on your face.

# Destiny: The Taken King

One year ago, *Destiny*'s campaign ended not with a bang so much as a poorly stifled fart. It was appropriate, in a way — the storytelling of the previous dozen or so hours had been largely guff. But it was a disappointment nonetheless, the most hyped game of 2014 closing out with a whimper, watching wordlessly as you stumbled into its baffling endgame.

What a difference a year makes. *The Taken King*'s story arc ends with an explosion; not of polygons and particles, but of things to do. You return to the Tower hub area and everyone wants a piece of you, offering rewards for a job well done and suggestions on what you might want to do next. Your quest log spreads to a second page, then a third. After 12 months spent running and re-running, week in and week out, the same missions and raids, it's a little overwhelming. It is hard to even know where to start.

The beauty is it doesn't matter. Everything has its own reward, and a guaranteed one at that. The base game's RNG systems are still around, but that matters far less when turning in a quest so often yields desirable weapons and armour. Randomness usually works in your favour now, with even the lowliest rank of enemies able to drop powerful gear when killed. Throughout *Destiny*'s first year, we could count the number of times we saw a legendary engram in open play on our fingers. *The Taken King* had that licked within a day or two.

Even some exotics, *Destiny*'s rarest gear, have become fixed rewards from certain tasks. One of the more humdrum questlines ends with the surprise reward of a brilliant scout rifle. Other exotic quests are more challenging, demanding extreme proficiency with certain weapons, completion of some of the game's toughest challenges, or that you strip the vast Dreadnaught ship belonging to title villain Oryx of its dozens of glimmering collectibles. Exotics can even be found more often in open play, with a new item, Three Of Coins, boosting the chance of bosses dropping them in engram form. *Destiny* has changed a lot with *The Taken King*, but perhaps the most rewarding tweak is the way loot visibly springs from bosses, rather than drops being heralded by a line of text or icon popup. Seeing a hulking space demon explode in a shower of blue (containing rare gear), purple (legendary) and gold (exotic) engrams is a buzzy thrill that even now, with a hundred hours played across three intoxicating weeks, has yet to lose even a fraction of its power.

*The Taken King* rains loot, then, as any good loot game should. Yet while the wider availability of top-tier items is one of this expansion's most refreshing tweaks, Bungie's greater achievement is its reinvention of supposedly lesser gear. Rare items are, as before, the most common kind of drop past the level cap, but are now vital additions to your loadout all the way through to the endgame. While legendary and exotic gear will

Progress up the new three-digit power curve is steady and almost constant, a vital change from the launch game

have better perks, a rare drop's attack or defence stat is based on your current power level. Meanwhile, your Light rating — the measure of your overall power — is now a three-digit average of the base attack or defence values of everything you have equipped, not the sum of a stat tied to certain pieces of armour. You might be wearing a legendary helm with a defence of 280, then pick up a rare with 295. Early on, you'll equip it to push up your Light, powering you up to access tougher missions. Later, you'll use it as Infusion fuel to boost the stats of gear that better complements your playstyle.

It is a simple change that has had a dramatic effect on both *Destiny*'s minute-to-minute action and its bigger picture. Every drop, no matter the rarity, now has at least the potential for meaning. Progress up the new, three-digit power curve is steady and almost constant, a vital change from the launch game, where it could take weeks to climb a single level. And Infusion means a much greater level of control over what your characters look like and how they play. Twelve months ago, the sole way of hitting the level cap was by wearing armour that was only available from the Vault Of Glass raid. You can reach *The Taken King*'s Light cap of 310 while wearing, and shooting, whatever you like.

**These changes only** tell half the story; the old *Destiny*'s problems ran far deeper than the way its content was structured and its gear doled out. Happily, Bungie has addressed these issues too. Storytelling is vastly improved, the tone overhauled to suit a game in which your sniper rifle reloads itself while you throw flaming hammers at space wizards. While Nolan North taking Peter Dinklage's role as your Ghost companion made headlines when it was announced, the real star is Nathan Fillion, whose talents were so weirdly wasted last time out. Fillion's Cayde-6 is wry, charming and a key player throughout the campaign. He is Captain Mal, questgiver and cutscene-quipper, and a key factor in aerating the stuffiness of the former *Destiny*. The missions are better too, with stealth, escape and platforming sections adding variety to a game that was previously wary of asking any more of you than simply shooting at things until they explode.

The exception to that rule was the Vault Of Glass, the core offering's fantastic six-player raid, where fights were as much about puzzle solving as precision shooting. The Vault's lead designer is *The Taken King*'s creative director, and the influence of Luke Smith's philosophy can be felt all the way through the game. It's especially prevalent on the Dreadnaught, the colossal Hive ship that plays host to many new story missions and strikes, and that's unlocked for patrol once you finish the campaign. Like *Destiny*'s planets, it's a series of instanced areas with respawning waves of enemies and chests full of upgrade materials. Unlike the ▶

ABOVE When we say King's Fall is more about puzzling than shooting, don't expect your trigger finger to take the night off. Death, however, comes not from buffing up enemies to ridiculous levels, but your failure to work out the puzzles at hand.
LEFT The Warlock's Stormcaller super is generally more use against mobs than bosses, but when the results look this good, pragmatism does tend to go out the window

BELOW Nine months ago we were sprinting through this ghostly corridor with a pack of angry Thralls at our back in the Crota's End raid. Here it's the start of a gentle thirdperson stealth mission
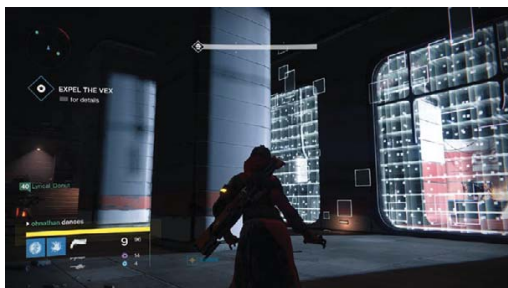


ABOVE The Collector's Edition goodies – an exotic class item, shader and dance move for each class – are available in a separate £20 bundle. Overpriced nonsense? Yes. If anyone asks, we definitely didn't buy one
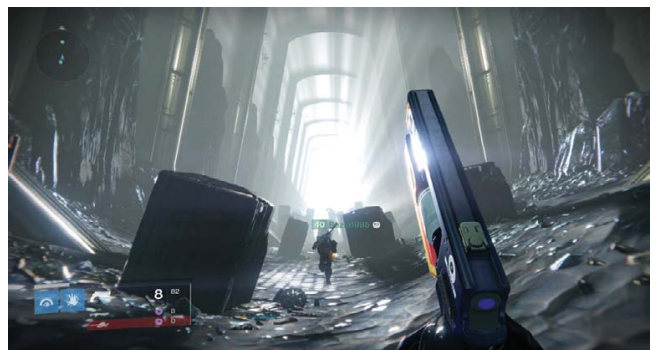
others, it's filled to bursting with secrets — complex cave networks, faraway ledges, mysterious terminals and chests that can only be opened with specific keys — and your inventory slowly fills with curious objects that hint at their purpose with *Souls*-like descriptions.

And if mystery's not your thing, there's the Court Of Oryx, where you can summon boss battles and any passing player can join in. Activated with a rune of one of three tiers — the first spawning a single boss fight, the second combining two of them, the third kicking off a battle with a recommended Light level of 300 that changes every week — they're a fine way of blowing off steam, and yet another path to a loot drop in a game that is now enormously generous with its gear.

**What of the** gear itself? In a way, *The Taken King*'s new additions to the armoury are less exciting than what came before. We are yet to find anything so overpowered as a Fatebringer or Gjallarhorn, but given the new emphasis on mechanics over bullet sponges, there's no need for it. Instead, weapons have situational benefits. Since the game practically throws loot at you, it makes perfect sense to have certain tools be of use in specific situations. Raid weapons, for instance, automatically reload when stowed, prompting a shrug of the shoulders at first and a Eureka moment when you realise they're almost essential in parts of the raid itself.

Ah, yes, the raid. *The Taken King* may have improved *Destiny* in almost every respect, but that was hardly the highest of bars to clear. As such, King's Fall was always going to be Bungie's biggest test — one it passes with a lengthy, varied sequence of boss fights that require patient puzzle solving and near-perfect coordination to surmount, interspersed with environmental challenges
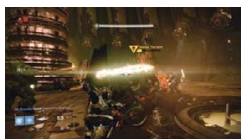


**BLADE DANCER**
While Bungie was surprisingly open in the run-up to *The Taken King*'s release, it kept quiet about its new weapon type until the 11th hour. Swords sit in the heavy weapon slot, which goes some way to both explaining and making up for the nerf to rocket launchers, and are an absolute delight to use, making mincemeat of even the toughest foes. Squeeze L2 and you can block any attack at the cost of some of your ammo; the exotic variant adds an R2 attack so powerful that it costs five 'bullets' per swing. With a three-hit combo that can be extended with a jump cancel, swords are a brilliant way of encouraging close-quarters combat after a year spent pinging rockets from afar.

Strikes are now among our favourite pastimes, thanks to a buff to drop rates the longer you stay in the playlist, and a piece of armour exclusive to each one. This boss can drop a natty pair of Warlock gauntlets, for instance

that lighten the mood a little with every slapstick demise. Better than the Vault Of Glass? Perhaps. We're postponing judgement until the other difficulties launch, but it's at least as good as the finest co-op experience around, which seems like praise enough.

Bungie has done a remarkable job with *The Taken King*, but not a perfect one. Some of its quests are too reminiscent of the *Destiny* of old, making you hang around in public spaces waiting for events to appear, killing time and the same old groups of enemies spawning from the same old places. Some waits are even more tortuous: we stayed up far too late one Thursday night to complete a frustrating part of an exotic quest, only to be told our handler was waiting on some parts and our reward wouldn't be ready until the following Wednesday. And while the new structure has done wonders for the PVE game, it has made a mess of the PVP Crucible. Quests demand wins, so players are quitting at the hint of a loss; each day, one gametype doles out valuable Legendary Marks for completing a match, meaning many aren't even trying to compete.

All of this is fixable, however, and while six months ago there'd have been reason to doubt Bungie's ability to put right *Destiny*'s many little failings, *The Taken King* is a game made of fixes. It uses preexisting flaws as the foundations for something that is better in just about every single way: bigger, more coherent and, best of all, immeasurably more generous. With that comes, appropriately, a puzzle for Bungie to solve. How do you continue to build on a game that has so few chinks in its lustrous, gleaming exotic armour?

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# Post Script

Interview: Luke Smith, creative director

The Taken King's creative director, **Luke Smith**, doesn't just make *Destiny*, but plays it too. The day before the game's release, he asked his Twitter followers how they were planning on spending the launch. His plans? A "20-plus hour poopsock session". Here, he reflects on how *The Taken King* feels now it's in the wild, shares future plans and explains why features we saw during **E284**'s cover visit didn't make the cut.

**You're in and out of the studio at the moment. What's the mood like now, three weeks after launch?**
Positive. We're psyched that people are enjoying the game. We're finding issues, of course, but we have an awesome live team collating issues and prioritising fixes. We don't feel like our work is done — we're never going to feel like our work is done with *Destiny*. It's like playing Whac-A-Mole: we think we've hit all the moles and then more pop up. We've restructured the studio now to better allow us to do that.

**You've already fixed an exploit using the Three Of Coins, which boosts the drop rate of exotics. Surely you knew it was going to be abused?**
We did. We understood when it went out the door that it was going to lead to some over-generosity in the exotic game, and I take responsibility for that. But the spirit of the Three Of Coins is really awesome. We wanted the game to be, and feel, more generous — and the ideal application of how these things should be used post-hotfix is yet to be discovered. I'm happy there's a story about *Destiny* being overly rewarding! Look at where we are now versus a year ago.

**Now you're seeing the game with a player's eyes, what are you disappointed with?**
There's definitely stuff in the game that, as a designer/director, I wish was better. I think we missed some opportunities to construct questlines that function in parallel — if we're going to ask you to go back to the Cosmodrome, it would be better to ask you to go back to the Cosmodrome and be really efficient and do a bunch of stuff at once, rather than sending you back there [again] a couple of days later.

**Player communities quickly unearthed the secrets of the Dreadnaught, and at the moment it seems that the last unsolved mystery is the Sleeper Simulant exotic. What else is left?**
There are a couple of pieces of that puzzle left. There's another exotic, No Time To Explain, and a hand cannon that's been datamined called The First Curse. Then there's some experiential variety coming that we haven't really talked about. I'm not letting the raid

"The spirit of the Three Of Coins is really awesome. We wanted the game to be, and feel, more generous"

team pat themselves on the back just yet — we've got a little bit more in store.

**Such as?**
In Hard mode, all of the boss fights have a new mechanic, a new element. There's also Challenge mode — a particular way of killing a raid boss that gets you a special emblem and a reward. Mathematically, you've only seen or completed five-thirteenths of the raid.

**A couple of items we saw a few months ago — the Cryptarch's corrupted engram missions, the Speaker selling a slot-specific drop buff for the raid — aren't in the game. What happened?**
Just bad, unfixable bugs we found in certification, so we punted them. There was another item that reset your Nightfall cooldown so you could run another one. We're going to experiment with them in the future.

**The original *Destiny*'s endgame was a hunt for raid gear to hit the level cap. Infusion has changed that. How would you define the endgame now?**
I think a huge part of building a character is building an identity — making yourself look cool and getting your stats the right way. I'm on the hunt for one particular chest piece; it's going to give me an extra fraction of a percentage in efficiency. I don't want players to feel like they *have* to do that, but I like the idea of being able to do that without having to worry about the vertical power game. We wanted the vertical power ascent to be quicker to get people into the content they're excited about. It took a really long time in vanilla *Destiny* to get into the raid. We wanted that to be lessened, and wanted players to begin to tinker with horizontal progression, visual progression and vanity.

**You're often criticised for not allowing matchmaking in raids. Could that ever change?**
I think matchmaking can make other players disposable to you. The reason that people quit out of strikes is because there's no consequence to their departure, just a punishment for that disposable person on the other end of the line. It's pretty hard for me, emotionally, to want to subject groups of players to that. What's not hard for me to think about is a version of *Destiny* that makes it easier to look for and find groups to go engage in difficult content with, a version that helps bring people together in a way that the current software doesn't. A bunch of the stickiness of *Destiny* for me is that it's the bar I can go to when I get home, where I can wear my pyjamas and shoot the shit with my friends. It's a game that's best played with others, and it's our responsibility to embrace that further in the game. ■

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# Soma

**Publisher/developer** Frictional Games
**Format** PC, PS4
**Release** Out now

Survival-horror is, like many subgenre names, a vague label. Survival is the goal of most games, after all, and diminishingly few are the horror efforts that don't induce fear through the threat of death. While *Soma* will inevitably be badged up this way, Frictional has conjured up a potent adventure that's a great deal more than the sum of its body parts.

Like Frictional's past works, *Penumbra* and *Amnesia*, *Soma* revels in the tactility of its environments and builds its set-pieces around inscrutable terrors. But it goes further by introducing a steak of playfully dark humour, used as a tension release valve as often as it is to underscore the unsettling ideas at its story's heart. It ruminates on grand, troubling ethical and philosophical questions with uncommon maturity. And it poses moral quandaries with real bite, but never stoops to congratulate or admonish you for your choices.

It's a remarkably confident step change for a studio that has, up until now, focused its creative energies entirely on finding clever ways to terrify. *Soma*'s remit is considerably broader and, as such, it has the potential to find itself in the position of both disappointing horror fanatics and scaring off adventure fans. But this precarious balancing act results in a game that better echoes the gallows-humour camaraderie and narrative beats of Hollywood's greatest sci-fi horror films than any of its peers, including the brilliantly frightening — but rather po-faced — *Alien: Isolation*. (In fact, *Soma* includes an Aliens reference as evocative as anything in The Creative Assembly's game.)

*Soma* attempts to pull off a similar sleight of hand with its AI, too, with more mixed success. Rather than rely on a single enigmatic foe, Frictional deploys a series of corridor-stalking aberrations, each with its own behaviours. It's a concerted effort to avoid the erosion of jitters that *Amnesia* suffered from once you learned the tricks employed to make its creatures appear so threatening, but while *Soma* keeps you guessing, it doesn't wholly avoid falling into the same trap.

The best of *Soma*'s mob of horrors is a creature that riffs on *Amnesia*'s Gatherers. It wears what looks like a diving helmet, brightly illuminated from the inside, and looking at it directly violently distorts the screen. You must try to keep it in the corner of your vision (though it's more often directly behind you as you flee into the next room in the hope of finding somewhere to hide) in order to keep track of it. It's a fantastic creation that's set loose on you before you've had a chance to mentally map the areas it haunts, compounding the sense of panic you feel as you try to deal with it.

At the other end of the spectrum is a tumorous lump like a walking mass of doner meat. Despite its silly appearance, it's still a threatening proposition initially. But the sections in which you encounter it afford too many opportunities to directly observe it,

*The enemy encounters are the weakest aspect of Soma. The game is at its best when you're left to wander about*



**CAST INTO THE SEA**
While you'll spend a lot of time alone, *Soma* does include other characters. Chief among these is deuteragonist Catherine Chun, a scientist working at the Pathos-II facility, who you'll come into contact with early on and is trying to resolve the situation. She helps you to understand your circumstances, and provides access to locked-down sections of the base, among other things. Exchanges between Chun and protagonist Simon are by turns funny and poignant, and while the voice acting occasionally sails perilously close to am-dram, the game's powerful story and high-level ideas carry everything along with considerable force.

exposing rudimentary pathfinding that falls far short of the standards of *Isolation*'s merciless hunter. Most of *Soma*'s enemies are fond of trying to catch out sneaking players by turning around unexpectedly just after they set off down a corridor. It happens so often you'll regularly be trapped in a hiding place for minutes at a time, and only some of the creatures consistently respond to the noise of, say, a tossed glass bottle.

***Soma*'s most effective** creations more than make up for its less successful ones, but without the ability to cower in cupboards, boxes or even under tables, the hide-and-seek stealth sections can feel less dynamic than those found in some of the game's contemporaries. Frictional attempts to lessen frustrations by offering you a second chance if you're caught, albeit one that comes with clouded vision and a beleaguering limp, but meet with capture a second time and you're scuppered. Even more generously, there's a way to restore your health — one so tightly bound to the expertly unfurled plot that we can't describe it without spoiling things — and nearby enemies will give their presence away with a range of guttural noises and the flickering screen distortions that their proximity induces. It's far from a perfect setup, but it's a forgiving one that introduces a couple of additional safety nets between you and the already generous checkpointing system.

While memorable, the infrequent enemy encounters are the weakest aspect of *Soma*. The game is at its best when you're left to wander (and, indeed, wonder) about the dank, leaky compounds that make up Pathos-II, the apparently abandoned deep-sea science base in which the game is set. Every space feels like it has a practical purpose, and environments continually yield evidence that alludes to the lives of those who used to live and work in this unfamiliar, dangerous space. The game draws you in further by requiring that you use a combination of trigger and analogue stick to pull open drawers, throw huge switches to pressurise airlocks, and plug heavy-duty cables into machinery. This well-telegraphed palpability enriches each environmental puzzle and componentry fetchquest and adds tension as the loud clanks of your interactions threaten to attract unwelcome attention. There are also moments of real poignancy, and a couple of the decisions we were asked to make along the way, although having no bearing on the way the game plays out, left us reeling.

That *Soma*'s AI can't quite live up to the assured poise of the rest of the game is inevitably disappointing, but then it's also indicative of the spectacularly high standard of world-building and storytelling that's on display here. *Soma* is consistently astonishing, and no monster, however unsettling its design, could ever hope to match the deeper psychological unease brought about by the game's brilliant premise.

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**RIGHT** You'll spend a lot of time peeking around corners, either trying to establish that the way is clear or keeping tabs on marauding threats. If you're spotted, running away is an option, but you won't find any safe lockers to hide in.
**MAIN** The Pathos-II facility is richly atmospheric, and through both its layout and the tech it's constructed around, exudes a convincing functionality that lends credence to the human tragedy of its tale.
**BOTTOM** *Soma*'s external sequences are as powerfully evocative is its indoor sequences, the infrequent lighting and muffled sounds adding to the inherent sense of danger







**ABOVE** As in *BioShock*'s Rapture, the water outside is invading Pathos-II's unkempt spaces. Every area is sprinkled with items to pick up and examine, and most objects betray something of the station's former inhabitants

# Post Script

Interview: **Thomas Grip**, creative director, Frictional Games

Frictional Games co-founder **Thomas Grip** should be a happy man. At the time of writing, *Soma*, the studio's first in-house game in five years (*Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs* was handled by The Chinese Room), has shifted just shy of 100,000 copies in its first week on sale, and garnered almost universal praise. But Grip is a perfectionist, so in this interview we discuss *Soma*'s hits and misses as he sees them. (Spoilers follow.)

**As an environment, Pathos-II feels really authentic. How much research did you do into undersea bases?**
Not that much, actually. The base was very much, 'Let's make it up as we go along.' That sums up the entire project, because there were a lot of unknowns from the get-go. Early on we weren't even really sure how much of the game would be inside, and you were originally meant to spend a lot more time in the water. So a lot of the indoor structures came along as we started to redesign stuff. But we did a *lot* of research into specific stuff like fish. We were very careful to pick species that could live at the depths where the game takes place.

**BioShock's Rapture casts a long shadow over any underwater environment. Was that problematic?**
It's really interesting: from what I read about the development of *BioShock*, we mirror a lot of how that game was developed. But we haven't been that influenced by *BioShock* other than checking out how the water was handled — we did that for a lot of other games, too. We found *BioShock* really helpful from a technical standpoint, but not aesthetic. Actually, the thing that has cast a bigger shadow on us has been the Alien movies, because we really wanted to make sure that our sci-fi corridors had a distinct feel to them.

**We really enjoyed the Aliens references, especially the missing-crew moment with the locators.**
That was almost a direct rip from it [laughs]. We had the storyline, but then we added other sections where we have these black-box locators, and it just hit us: 'This is Aliens — we need to have a map that shows where everyone is!' It emerged naturally from our story and works, so we thought, 'Let's use it as an homage.'

**Giger seems to have had a strong influence on the WAU constructs and dripping structure gel, too.**
It was a big influence, and it came pretty early on. The initial idea was 'Giger with fish scales'; then one of our concept artists, Rasmus [Gunnarsson], sketched some early designs of that and it was like, 'Yeah, this is cool — we *need* to have that.' It feels like there should have been more games with his inspiration. Perhaps I missed some, but I can only recall *Dark Seed*.

> "Some people have said that it's totally unscary, and others say it's so scary they can't even finish the opening hour"

**Something else that's uncommon in horror games is humour. Were you nervous about including it?**
I mostly left Mikael [Hedberg], our writer, to do what he thought fitting. He believes it's the environment and journey that set the atmosphere, so the characters don't have to make it *more* scary, they just need to bring the human part of the story instead. And humour is the most realistic thing you can do in horror because it's a vent that you need in order to keep your sanity.

**In terms of your goals for the game's enemies, how pleased are you with the final result?**
I'm semi-happy. The most common complaint that we've had is that there's not enough mechanical variety to them, and not enough mechanical differences to other games. But that's actually a design decision. The whole idea behind the enemies is that they should be a background element that you project your imagination on to. It worked out awesome for the people who experienced everything [as we intended], but it worked out really bad for some other people.

**Amnesia popularised hiding in cupboards, but why did you choose to leave that out of Soma, and other genre staples like hiding under desks?**
I'll actually say straight out that I think that was a slight design blunder from us — we could have done more. But then again, it leaves you a bit exposed and we did include some hiding places, but I think a closet or two here and there would have been appreciated! It's always a difficult balance between having environments that are narratively plausible and environments that, gameplay-wise, offer you all the options.

**What was the thinking behind the health system?**
Once you've experienced death you know where you're at — you know you've experienced the worst thing that can happen to you. It's the unknown that's the most feared, so instead you're knocked down, you're hurt and you need to go further. And then incorporated into that is this health system, which is disgusting, and it's also unclear as to whether what you're doing is ultimately more harmful. We had even more ambitious efforts on the death system from the get-go, but it didn't turn out.

**Were you worried the game might be too scary for some and not hardcore enough for horror obsessives?**
[Laughs] It's been very hard to figure out where to draw the line. We've heard everything from people saying that it's totally unscary, to others saying it's so scary they can't even finish the opening hour. So I can't see any way to oblige everyone. We're just going for our intended experience and hoping for the best. ∎

# Transformers: Devastation

Or, if you prefer, *Transformers: Witches In Disguise*. From any studio but PlatinumGames, this would be considered a clone, a cut-and-shut job welding licensed Transformers fan service to *Bayonetta*'s best-in-class melee action. Coming from Platinum, though? Well, it's still that, but it is also elegant, often spectacular and, above all, a work of good old common sense. Transformers, it turns out, are a fine fit for the *Bayonetta* template — perhaps even, in places, as fine as the Umbran Witch herself.

Though not, admittedly, without taking liberties. We don't recall Bumblebee, Grimlock et al being blessed with double jumps or swanky light-light-heavy combos in the 1980s cartoon on which this is aesthetically based. Nor do we recall Optimus Prime and Sideswipe being able to slow time with a perfectly executed dodge. But the Autobots' vehicle morphs make sense in the Platinum house style, powering a hard-hitting combo ender that plays the role of Wicked Weave, and a vehicle mode for quickly covering space that is the perfect replacement for Bayonetta's panther transformation.

It's *Bayonetta* on the battlefield, then — and off it, too. The Ark, the Autobots' base of operations, plays host to a shop that sells genre-standard restorative items and some highly familiar extra moves, including a parry and a quick shove to knock an opponent off balance. Yet the Ark also helps set *Devastation* apart from its obvious inspiration, since it's here that you'll choose which of the five playable Autobots you'll be taking into battle, and tinker with their loadouts.

Each has their default weapons, but many more are dropped by enemies or found out in the world, locked in chests or buried in caches that can be unearthed with a vehicular ground pound. The weaker finds can be fed to your favourite weapons to power them up; elemental properties and stat buffs can be passed over too. The process itself could be speedier — weapons have to be dismantled one at a time, which is a chore when you've just finished a level with 20 additions to your inventory, and it takes four or five of them to push your favourite sword or gun up a level — but you won't be complaining when you end up with a fire-infused shotgun that does several-thousand damage with every headshot.

Yes, headshot. While the majority of *Devastation*'s moment-to-moment action consists of Platinum's signature balletic fisticuffs, there will be times when you need to draw a gun. The Decepticons can transform too, after all, and as the game progresses they become fond of turning into things that can fly. A quick burst of gunfire will bring them back down to terra firma for a beating. Weapons are equally useful up close (fired mid-dodge, perhaps, in a delightful nod to *Vanquish*) and from mid-range, where they're ideal for finishing off a dangerous bot from a safe distance when you get down to your last few pixels of health. Which happens a lot.

> Enemies hit like trucks – and not just the ones that *are* trucks. A boss can be going perfectly until a mistake gets you stunned

Appearances can be deceiving, and it's tempting to see *Devastation* as a lighter take on the 3D brawler, especially after the studio's work on the overly gentle *The Legend Of Korra*. On first inspection, this is also a somewhat more mainstream action game than Platinum is known for, which feels like a logical decision given that the logo on the box is as likely to draw the eye of '80s nostalgists (and kids who sit through Michael Bay's various movie versions) as it is action-game fanatics. The complexity of the combo system has been toned down a bit too, in order to bring big damage within the reach of the less genre-savvy player.

**But by the** time you're halfway through this seven-chapter campaign on Warrior (normal) difficulty, you will start to struggle. Enemies hit like trucks — and not just the ones that *are* trucks. A boss fight can be going perfectly until a single mistake gets you stunned, then caught in a three-hit combo that kills you. And as things progress, Platinum stacks the odds higher and higher until the screen is full of threats — robots swinging big hammers at your face; robots sniping from behind shields on far-off platforms; robot planes swooping above, dropping their neon payloads on your head. Even on Warrior, the action can frustrate. On Commander, the next difficulty up, enemies hit even harder. And on Prime, the game's hardest tier, they move twice as fast. *Bayonetta Lite*? Not exactly, no.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always feel fair. A couple of set-piece fights are set entirely in mid-air, and keeping track of an opponent blessed with an optional flight mode through a large 360 space is a bit of a disaster. While audio and visual cues signal imminent attacks, the length of time between cue and action is too variable for a game that places so many threats offscreen. And things are further muddled by the way Platinum uses the same sound effect to signal attacks and opportunities to use your vehicular combo ender. In this genre, we expect to be overwhelmed, and attacked by unseen aggressors, but we also expect to be given the tools and the information to cope. It's something Platinum understands as well as any studio, but doesn't quite put into consistent enough practice here.

Yet there are shades of Platinum at its best here too. The '80s-cartoon aesthetic looks delightful, despite some bland environments. The script delivers the same blend of portentous and cheeky as the source material. Most importantly, there are moments where everything flows, where every dodge is perfectly timed, enemy health bars melt away and the mission-complete screen pops up with an SS rating — that Zen-like feeling of absolute mastery that so many studios strive for, but so very few can reach. *Transformers: Devastation* may not be pure Platinum, but there's more than enough of its glimmer in here to disguise the little flaws.

**8**

**LEFT** Platforming sections appear later on, but carry little threat – failure deposits you on a nearby ledge. This part was made even easier by a hover move developed in the Tech minigame at the Ark.
**BELOW** Optimus Prime is voiced by Peter Cullen, who first lent his dulcet tones to the Autobot in 1984's The Transformers. Many of his fellow cast return here; Vince DiCola, composer of the 1986 film of the same title, also features.
**MAIN** Here's Bumblebee in Focus mode, AKA Witch Time. Autobots have something Bayonetta lacks: a damaging counterattack, performed by holding an attack button as soon as Focus activates



**ABOVE** Complete a mission and the camera cuts to a more dramatic framing for the killer blow, as well as providing the traditional report card. And yes, OK, that's a C rank. We had our fair share of SS grades too. Honest

# Rock Band 4

Whenever a favourite band gets back together, there's always an edge of trepidation to the jubilation. The old material was great, sure, but can they really reproduce that magic? And even if they can, will it mean as much to us now as it did all those years ago? Indeed, whenever something that was previously popular enjoys a revival, there is an unspoken anxiety beneath the surface: are we all perhaps a little bit old for this now?

No, not in *Rock Band*'s case. Playing pretend instruments hasn't gone from riotously entertaining to patently ridiculous — although, let's be honest with ourselves, it has always been both — in the five-year gap between this and *Rock Band 3*. Playing in a successful band is still a near-universal fantasy, and playing *Rock Band* is still as close as many of us are likely to get. The elation of sailing note-perfect with bandmates through a tough section of a song; the surge of adrenaline when you tilt your guitar or finish a drum flourish to kick in your multiplier and send the virtual crowd into a frenzy; screeching the high notes in an '80s metal classic; involuntarily falling to your knees in the middle of a solo: it all still feels great. *Rock Band 4* is very good at making you feel brilliant, and the few tweaks and additions Harmonix has made to the near-perfect *Rock Band 3* systems are all in service of that feeling.

The most significant of these new additions, freestyle guitar soloing, does what no music game thus far has done: it successfully incorporates improvisation. For most of a song, you follow the notes and chords of a song as expertly mapped to a five-button guitar controller, as you always have. But when it's time for a guitar solo, instead of the usual avalanche of coloured notes, the track sparkles, leaving you to play along however you like. The game subtly adjusts your timing and picks from preselected note sequences to make you sound, well, awesome, so long as you play with reasonable timing, whether you're shredding out sixteenth notes or tapping on the bottom frets or morosely picking sustained notes on the top frets. In almost every song, it sounds fantastic, and makes you feel more than ever like you are really playing music.

There is a small downside to the new solo mechanic, however, in that nailing intricate solos was one of the most satisfying elements of *Rock Band* for high-level players. Being able to tap, strum and whammy your way through by playing pretty much anything might make you feel like a virtuoso, but it takes away the sense of technical achievement that came from mastering complicated note patterns. The solo sections give score bonuses for following guidance, indicating with note-track patterning when you should be playing on the top or bottom frets and what rhythm you should be going for, but following it is optional. *Rock Band 4* is still satisfying to play for the expert thanks to the excellent

## Playing pretend instruments hasn't gone from riotously entertaining to patently ridiculous in the five-year gap



**THE COST OF ROCK**
Something that *Rock Band 4* will struggle with in shops is the variance of different packages and prices, which are confusing even for veterans of plastic instrument acquisition. The most expensive option, the Band-In-A-Box, is £220, though it will leave you one short of a full four-piece, coming with drums, a mic and a single plastic Stratocaster. A guitar bundle with the game is £110. If you're happy to use old instruments retrieved from a musty attic, and can find them, the game by itself is £50 – unless you're playing on Xbox One, in which case you'll also need a legacy adapter to make your old instruments play nicely with new technology. That package costs £70. DLC songs, meanwhile, cost 99p each, but you can import your old ones.

quality of Harmonix's note charts, but without those technically demanding solos, it's not quite as challenging. Those who miss them will find an option in the guitar-specific menu to turn freestyling off and restore the old cascading note patterns.

*Rock Band 4* is, of course, most fun with friends, though getting a full set of new instruments represents a significant investment. For the solo player, the main attraction is the returning Tour mode (also playable with however many band members you have to hand), a structured journey through all the songs on the disc peppered with witty text that is quite clearly the product of experience. There is a choice mechanic in here now too; it even leads to different endings. Creating a fantasy band and outfitting them with instruments, outfits and hairstyles is entirely optional, but if you choose to venture beyond Quick Play, it's easy to get oddly invested in their fortunes.

**The new instruments** are excellent, with an almost-silent strum bar on the guitar and quieter pads on the drums, but it's difficult to recommend that anyone with access to older *Rock Band* or *Guitar Hero* instruments should upgrade immediately, given the prices. Testing a variety of old plastic with *Rock Band 4* on PS4 proved entirely successful, once their tiny USB adapters were hunted down and retrieved. Importing old DLC was also relatively painless, and it's hugely impressive that Harmonix has managed to navigate what must have been an absolute nightmare of old licences and wireless technologies to ensure that existing *Rock Band* fans can play all their old purchases on all their old, overpriced plastic instruments.

There is, however, one glaring design flaw on the new PS4 guitar controller, which is a Share button right below the strum bar, unprotected by the raised plastic that prevents you from accidentally hitting the Options button below it. Until we improvised by taping a bottle-cap to the instrument, our guitarist would interrupt things with an unintentional press of the Share button at least three times a song. An option to disable it should be a top priority in forthcoming patches.

*Rock Band 4*'s fun is still the same flavour as it was five years ago, certainly. This year's other returning music game superstar, *Guitar Hero Live*, is taking the genre in a new direction with a new guitar, aesthetic and business model. In contrast, *Rock Band 4* is an old favourite returning almost exactly as you remember it. It's playing things a little safe, perhaps, a conservative, retrograde step from the masterful *Rock Band 3*. Yet it is impossible to dislike something that is brimming with the same passion and enthusiasm for the transformative power of rock. It's infectious, and it is difficult to imagine that anyone with any affection for rock music could fail to appreciate it.

**8**
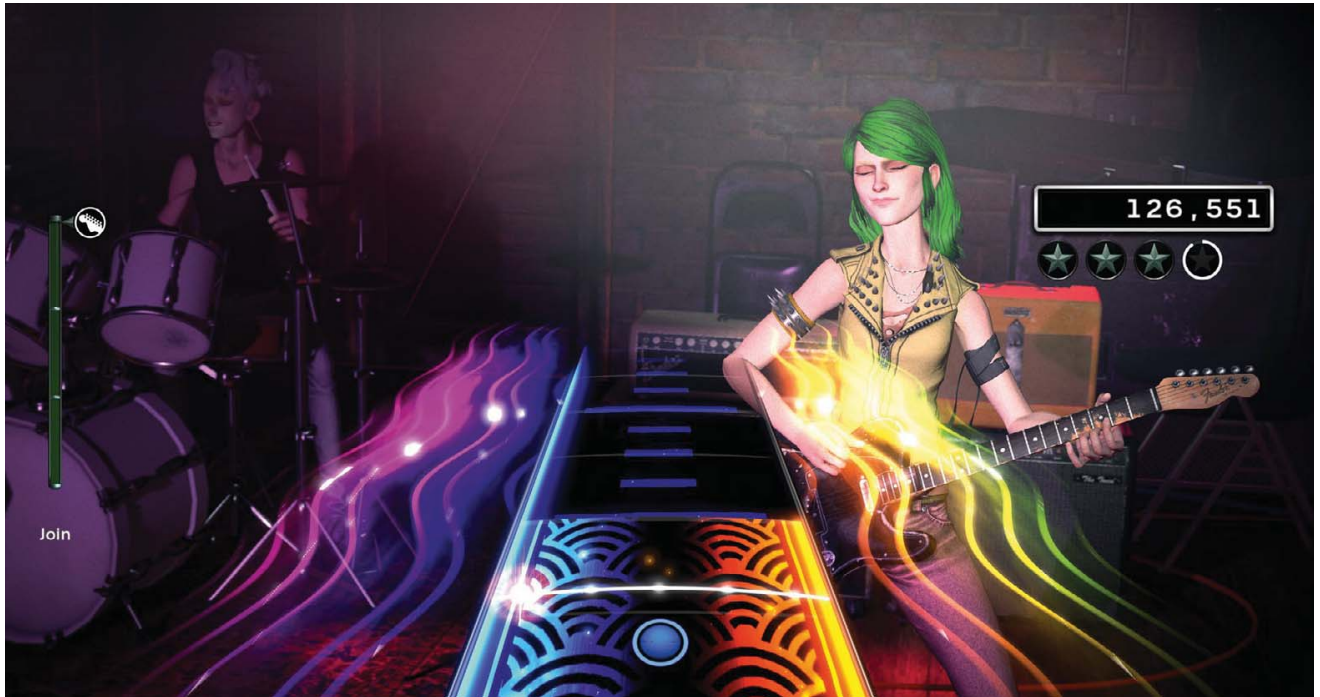
ABOVE The Tour mode now has a series of choices to make, giving each band a slightly different journey. A manager might offer to take you on, for instance, earning the group more money but sacrificing cred with the fans





MAIN The new guitar has built-in sensors that automatically calibrate the latency from your sound system and TV, which means no more menu fiddling after your drummer complains that the timing's off.
ABOVE The on-disc song selection leans towards American tastes, but the quality is high. A library of some 1,500 DLC songs, meanwhile, will cater to fans of any genre.
LEFT Improvisation is now a part of most songs, thanks to the new freestyle soloing. Singers, too, can add their own flair to a song by harmonising with the vocal track

# Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5

Y ou know you're in for something special when even the developer's intro splash has framerate problems. Expectations are lowered right off the bat, and with good reason: this is about as stable as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5* ever gets. It is shockingly, brazenly unfinished, a remarkable mess of a game in just about every respect. There's the insipid visuals, the abysmal technical performance, the will-this-do? mission design, and the comically dreadful physics. *THPS5* is an insult to its history, to its licensed skaters and sponsors, to modern hardware, and to anyone who plays it. The only person to emerge from all this with their head held high is the Activision suit who has presumably earned some kind of medal for having the chutzpah to suggest selling the game for £40, and the brass neck to push it out the door in this state.

*THPS5* would have been an ugly game ten years ago; indeed, we might even have preferred it in a lower resolution than 1080p, since at least there'd be less of it to look at. Environments are bland and barren, their textures arriving late on the scene thanks to streaming issues on consoles that are capable of so much more. The second you spawn into a level based on *THPS2*'s School II and start to roll forward, the framerate falls through the floor and slowly lurches its way back up to something approximating stability. For a while, anyway: the refresh rate jerks up and down like a yo-yo on a knotted string throughout, and there's rarely an obvious explanation as to why.

Still, if it's bafflement you're after, you've come to the right place. Quite how you can make such an extravagant mess of a near-perfect 16-year-old physics model is anyone's guess, but Robomodo has. Ollie innocently towards a handrail and the engine interprets your gentle, foot-high jump as a leap of such force that you clip the rail and fly a couple of hundred feet into the sky. One poorly judged aerial spin sees us crash into the base of a quarter pipe and slide on our backs across the length of the arena. We have lost legs through floors and seen arms disappear through walls; we've fallen out of the world, spinning into the blackness beyond.

Such glitches in a game so clearly pushed out of the door before it was ready for the public gaze are to be expected; perhaps, if we're feeling kind, they're even forgivable. Yet some of Robomodo's worst crimes against science are intentional, the studio fiddling with a physics model that was fine just the way it was.

We should have seen it coming: similar tinkering with the series' clockwork systems turned the studio's 2012 remaster-cum-compilation *THPS HD* from what seemed like a sure slam dunk into an embarrassing air ball. Yet there are some mind-boggling design decisions here, chief among them the Slam move, which fractures the laws of gravity and thuds you sharply downwards from the air. The intent, presumably, is to give you a

**Publisher** Activision
**Developer** Robomodo
**Format** 360, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
**Release** Out now

## Quite how you can make such an extravagant mess of a near-perfect 16-year-old physics model is anyone's guess

**CREATE OR DIE**
As you complete objectives, you level up and unlock skill points, increasing your celebrity skater's stats – movement speed, ollie jump height, balance, and so on – in the traditional fashion. You also acquire new character models, which take the concept of player customisation to fairly ludicrous extremes: the screenshots you see on these pages all feature, believe it or not, Tony Hawk himself. Elsewhere, there's a clunky level editor whose early player creations are rather telling. A Most Liked submenu yields a screen full of levels that have been given precisely zero likes, and more than half of them are remakes of the original *THPS*'s Warehouse level, as if players are desperately looking back on a simpler, more technically stable, much happier time.

way of preventing yourself flying out of bounds and losing your combo, an occasional problem throughout the series' life that's especially prevalent here. It's not the worst idea on paper, but mapping it to the same button as grinds is a special sort of madness. Suddenly, 16 years of muscle memory count for nothing, a fractionally premature button press seeing you clatter back to Earth in the wrong place, killing your flow and combo. Newtonian physics are disrespected elsewhere by red ramps that boost you pointlessly high into the sky, a double jump on a level set on city-block rooftops, and a space station where gravity's pull is reduced — but only in certain areas, leaving you second guessing, usually incorrectly, how early you need to jump.

**Even when physics** is behaving as it should, Robomodo's design team ensures you don't have too much of a good time. While a straight-up high-score challenge is the first order of business when loading into one of the eight stages for the first time, and is as satisfying as ever when the Slam mechanic isn't ruining your run, things deteriorate rapidly after that. You're left with fetch-and-carry quests (find ice cream cones around a warehouse, then deliver them to the pool outside), speed challenges (skate through rings to a time limit) and a tremendous amount of weird nonsense, perhaps asking you to destroy targets using fireworks that shoot from your board when you do a flip trick, or to knock barrels of toxic waste into the puke-green sludge of an indoor pool. The difficulty curve is all over the place and by the end even the high-score challenges have lost their lustre — the lowest tier of the infuriating space level asks for 1.5 million points in two minutes.

With all that in mind, it's understandable that the game's much-touted, series-first online mode is on the quiet side. Our high-score and deathmatch invites go unheeded, the arena filled with fellow players standing stock still (looking up trade-in prices on their phones, we assume) and the action obscured by constant text popups as player after player leaves the game. Meanwhile, server-side connection hiccups — of which we've experienced a few — boot you back to the main menu. It all feels thoroughly pointless.

All of it. The rumour mill has it that *THPS5* has been shoved into stores so prematurely because Activision's Tony Hawk licence expires at the end of the year; we suspect that had the Birdman known this would have been his videogame swan song, he'd have offered up an extension for free. A man who spends his days twirling gracefully through the air has ended his videogame career clattering to Earth at speed, his arm disappearing through the floor before he skids on his backside 100 metres across the stage, clipping through a wall and pinging off into the infinite void, where he will hopefully find some peace.

**2**

**ABOVE** Red ramps have the most dramatic effect on the heights you can achieve, but the orange variety still give you enough hangtime for an easy 1080. Some levels have boost pads on the floor, for some reason





**TOP** As in *THPS HD*, these challenges see a skater's cranium slowly swell to giant proportions. If you don't land a combo by the time the counter in the top reaches 100 per cent, their head explodes. **MAIN** Objectives in this series have always been a mixed bag – we still wince at the memory of finding all those tramps in Venice Beach – but *THPS5* is on a whole other level. **RIGHT** It's caveman with a bucket on his head, naturally. Other customisation options include Transformers, aliens and a slew of head and costume swaps that primarily serve to make you look like an extra in a Blink 182 video

# Project Zero: Maiden Of Black Water

Amid the swirl of bleak ideas explored by this unusually thoughtful horror sequel, the one that perhaps resonates longest involves a folklorist positing the notion of the camera as a "lonely box". Does that loneliness belong to the subject, isolated within the frame, or to the photographer, looking through the viewfinder as if gazing into the void? Maybe it's both.

Koei Tecmo's series has always sought to scare players by inviting them to get unsettlingly close to its ghostly subjects. And in using Wii U's GamePad to frame shots for its spirit-banishing Camera Obscura, it has the perfect conduit to discomfit still further. You hold the controller in front of your face as tortured spirits lurch out of the darkness, spectral fingers grasping at you. Some spin in an elegant dance of death; some jerk and twitch, perpetually dangling from an invisible noose; others crawl and lurch, desperately scrabbling for one last human contact before their light is extinguished. And yet you wait for them to approach, knowing that an extreme close-up is the quickest — most merciful — way to put them out of their misery.

Tilting the controller offers a chance to deal more damage through full-body shots, while other ghosts release fragments that must be snapped to prevent a

**Koei Tecmo's motives for the 'wetness' mechanic (when damp, your defence is lowered, but your shots deal more damage) may not be all that pure. Plenty of attention is paid to how flimsy clothing can look when saturated**
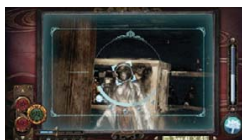
**SNUFF FLICK**
You're once again invited to ignore your instincts after the fatal shot is snapped. Reach out to touch the form of a ghost as its spirit fades and you'll witness a glimpse of the person's demise. These are rendered as water-damaged VHS footage, affording them a troubling veracity, and if the camera shows a degree of restraint at the most violent moments, then the imagination too readily fills in the rest. Few are mandatory, but you'll gain bonus points towards upgrades for watching.

regeneration. Inevitably, the game's first half is more frightening, but encounters retain intensity throughout.

While an episodic story occasionally struggles to contrive motivations for the three playable leads to return to the game's mountainous setting after dark, this network of ornate shrines, tunnels and dilapidated buildings is home to some exceptional set-pieces. There's a truly disquieting moment when protagonist Yuuri stumbles into a forest of dangling effigies, a disturbing image even before you consider the story's ties to the Sea Of Trees, Japan's infamous suicide spot. Later, a bravura firstperson sequence highlights the universal paradox of horror: the irresistible force of the desire to know meeting the immovable object that is the reluctance to find out. If many of its peers explore the fear of the unknown, *Maiden Of Black Water* taps into the terror of the inevitable and the unavoidable.

Some will doubt the merits of a guiding spirit, who will lead you to your destination with a squeeze of the trigger, yet it's thematically apposite. These characters are, after all, irresistibly drawn towards the darkness, whether it's a morbid fascination with the deceased, or the deep, lingering melancholia of (possibly suicidal) depression. Likewise saturated in sorrow, *Maiden* may be too gruelling for some — this is a potent and upsetting work that leaves a deep impression, spreading and darkening like a bruise.

**8**

# The Legend Of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes

Nintendo's recent fascination with fashion has given it a new pep in its step. There's something of *Splatoon*'s freshness in the carefree frivolity of *Tri Force Heroes'* intro, wherein a stylish princess is robbed of her regal threads and forced to don a brown unitard. Her wailing father thus demands a trio of prodigiously sideburned heroes set out to find her a new outfit. A perky soundtrack suggests light-hearted tomfoolery awaits, but Nintendo ultimately fails to recapture the competitive edge and mischievous invention of *Four Swords Adventures*.

Three Links are required at all times, which naturally rules out a twoplayer option. You can cooperate with other players online or locally — generously, the entire game can be played via Download Play — while lone players command two Doppels, macabre dolls with Shy Guy-style death masks to which Link can transfer his soul with a tap on the touchscreen. Yes, you can still throw one another off cliff edges, but with a shared life meter, there's less room for horseplay here.

The trio can form a totem to reach high platforms and spar with tall bosses — an idea that would seem to have limited range, and so it proves. And yet it's lent much by the conscious limitations of the way you

**In theory, bosses present less danger to lone players, since they can't harm the Links you're not controlling. But while a quick switch can often save the day, you'll still lose a heart if a Link is nudged into lava, or off the edge**

**Publisher/developer** Nintendo (EPD)
**Format** 3DS
**Release** Out now (JP), October 23



**LINK BATTLE**
Each world discovered unlocks a new arena for the competitive Coliseum mode, the game's only option for just two players. The persistent presence of Wallmasters – which will drain all your hearts if they connect – keeps things moving, though the mode doesn't hit its chaotic peak until a third player is introduced. Those who've been playing longer have a distinct advantage, too, since some outfits (such as the cactus suit, which damages foes on impact) are more effective than others.

communicate with others. Coordinating a plan is simple in local play, but online partners are restricted to pictorial icons, whether you're requesting a piggyback, suggesting a bomb throw, or simply pointing the way forward. At times, it's like attempting to relay a masterplan via semaphore, prompting moments of entertaining confusion and passive-aggressiveness: impatient players will likely resort to tapping the same icon repeatedly to chivvy along dawdling allies.

Yet we've seen so many of these puzzles before. There are pressure plates to stand on, switches to hit, and pyres to set ablaze with arrows shot through nearby flames. One player will blow another over a chasm with the gust jar; once across, the other can return the favour with a boomerang. The stage design is compromised by the need to cater to lone players and groups, too. With a handful of exceptions, the intricacy of its environmental riddles is limited to afford solo players the time to move three Links into position. Inevitably, those exceptions prove irritatingly exacting without two live assistants.

For a fashion-conscious game, unlockable outfits are also integrated with uncharacteristic gracelessness, functioning as little more than difficulty modifiers. So, carefree and likeable as it is, this coltish caper isn't particularly well tailored: baggy in places and restrictive in others, it's proof that for multiplayer *Zelda*, four swords are better than three.

**6**
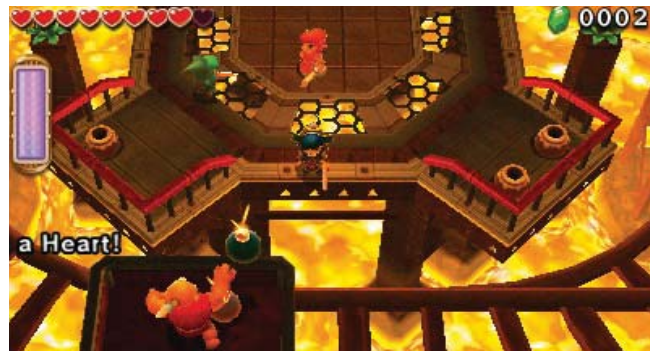
# Ultimate Marvel Vs Capcom 3

How a chaotic clash of heroes became
fighting games' finest spectator sport

BY NATHAN BROWN

Superheroes are broken. It's why Hollywood's current obsession with the caped and costumed hasn't fully crossed over into games: they need balance. While we like our power fantasies too, they must always come with some kind of threat. It's why Batman, who draws his power from his bank account but remains vulnerable to bullets, works well in games, while Superman, who fears nothing on Earth, does not. Short of giving every roaming thug Kryptonite knuckledusters, there's not a lot you can do.

Superman's absence from *Ultimate Marvel Vs Capcom 3*'s colossal roster is a matter of ownership, not logistics, but had he belonged to Marvel, then this might be one of the few games that could reasonably offer him a home. It is a game that revels in the unworkable and the absurd, taking some of the most powerful superheroes in comic-book history and pitting them against the great and good of the Capcom universe, buffing the less powerful to give them a fighting chance against the godlike.

There are 50 characters in all (including the two DLC fighters), from which you pick a team of three. That equates to almost 120,000 possible teams even before you factor in assists, which let you summon a partner from offscreen to deliver a single, cooldown-controlled move. Each fighter has three assists to choose from, too, meaning the game's character-select screen really offers some three million possibilities.

Whichever you pick will be capable of truly ridiculous things. This is a superhero riot of hundred-hit combos, a screen-filling mess of neon plasma fireworks, and a recipe for disaster. An entire studio could spend years tweaking its data values in an endless, fruitless search for perfect balance. In the four years since its release, *Ultimate Marvel Vs Capcom 3* has been patched three times, the most recent of which still came less than six months after launch. It is a game beset by problems, but few have ever been fixed, and no more ever will be. Capcom's Marvel licence expired in 2013.

Capcom's Yoshinori Ono once said that he liked putting the odd overpowered character in his games, because doing so fosters a strong community spirit, calling back to the essence of the Japanese arcade as players come together to devise counter-strategies to even the odds. Ono was not referring to *Marvel* (as fans shorten the unwieldy full title) but *Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition*, and specifically two characters. Yun and Yang would later be patched into a more reasonable state, but not until Ono had been proven right: by the patch, the two weren't as dominant as they had been at the start anyway. *Marvel*'s more powerful characters have followed a similar trajectory: they have dominated, fallen back as players have worked out how to deal with them, then risen again as the counters are themselves countered. On it goes until something else is found in those millions of permutations, and the dance begins anew.

**The first dance** was led by Phoenix, who looked down on the rest of the cast from the summit of the tier list thanks to her two forms. The first isn't much of a problem, really — perfectly capable in the right hands, certainly, but she has the lowest health pool in the game and is no match for the roster's upper echelons. But if you kill her, and she has a full stock of five Hyper meters, she resurrects in dramatically more powerful form, screaming, "I can't control it!" Players certainly can; amid the resulting chaos, a Dark Phoenix can take out entire teams in seconds. There were calls for a patch, naturally, but since the handful of tweaks that came in the transition from vanilla *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* to *Ultimate*, Phoenix has stayed unchanged.

A fight against a Phoenix team is unlike any other in *Marvel*. The max-meter requirement for her resurrection is central, with the Phoenix player building towards a full stock as quickly as they can with their other two characters. Across the screen, meanwhile, their opponent must dispatch Phoenix herself as quickly as possible, certainly before that Hyper meter fills, and ideally without killing her teammates first.

Phoenix doesn't just come back from the dead, you see. She also has her X-Factor — a game-wide comeback mechanic, available once per round — which boosts movement speed and damage output while restoring recently lost health. It can, by itself, turn an entire match on its head. In Phoenix's hands, it's more powerful still, since its ▶

restorative powers negate her second form's biggest, perhaps only, problem: as soon as she resurrects, her health bar refills then slowly begins to drain away. The weaker your team, the longer the duration of X-Factor; when you're down to your last character, it'll last twice as long as it would if you'd activated it with all three still alive. Phoenix is the perfect 'anchor' character, kept offscreen until her team is down, then coming in to annihilate the opposition.

So the Phoenix team player is essentially using a team of just two characters with no resources, while setting up a comeback should they need it. Their foe, meanwhile, must be aggressive, spending resources to get Phoenix out of the match. Their best option is the Snapback, a move that pings an opponent off the screen and forcibly tags in one of their teammates. Should that fail,

the loud chorus of boos that greeted her selection on a tournament stage. No matter — another threat, albeit of a very different kind, was right around the corner.

They call it Morridoom, and it's still effective. *Darkstalkers*' Morrigan has a Ryu-style horizontal fireball, Soul Fist, that can be thrown while grounded or in the air. One of her Hyper Combos, Astral Vision, spawns a clone at the opposite end of the screen

## ITS SECRETS HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED NOT IN THE ARCADES OF AKIHABARA, BUT ON CONSOLES ACROSS AMERICA

they could launch an all-out assault and kill everyone before Phoenix has her meters. Or they could just take their chances against the game's most powerful fighter.

A Phoenix match is *Marvel* at its most broken and also its finest, a spectacle of see-sawing momentum, tension giving way to explosion over and over again for 99 enthralling seconds. Across the years, the odds have evened out, players coming together to compose an unofficial strategy guide devoted to a single character who in any other game would have been patched into irrelevance. Phoenix teams won the Evo tournament — fighting games' biggest stage — in both 2011 and 2012, the first two years of *Marvel*'s life. But they haven't won since.

Phoenix faded from prominence not only because the community had learned to cope with her, but also, you suspect, because of

that mirrors her every move. Combine those abilities and you have the basis of a pretty tricky bullet-hell shooter. Add in Doctor Doom's Hidden Missile, which makes a volley of rockets fall onto the opponent from above, and you create a near-impossible one. Pioneered by New York player 'ChrisG', a Morridoom team has never passed the Evo test, but it's a regular sight in the latter stages of just about every tournament. Like the Phoenix fight, it's like nothing else in the game. It's cheap, ridiculous and borderline unfair, but in a game that is never again to be updated, all players can do is learn to live with it.

It's something *Marvel* players are very good at. *Marvel Vs Capcom 2* remained popular on the competitive scene for a decade, and would have lasted even longer had a successor not appeared. It's easy to

Phoenix Wright must scour the stage for three pieces of evidence. When the search is complete, he gets access to a host of new moves, such as a huge accusatory finger that covers most of the screen

see *Marvel* having a similar lifespan — even longer, perhaps, since a sequel appears unlikely. Despite having more star power than just about everything else on shelves, sales stood at just 1.2 million units worldwide by March of this year.

**It isn't hard** to see why. To newcomers, it's an illegible mess, a noisy, chaotic entry in a genre that, despite the complexity of high-level play, is often easy to understand: two characters, two depleting health bars, and a timer. Even to experienced fighting game players, *Marvel* can be hard to follow, but over time you learn to focus on the things that matter: the setup that lands the first hit of the 100-hit combo, the tricky mix-up that follows when the next character jumps into the fray, the risky but perfectly timed Hyper Combo or X-Factor activation that triggers a comeback. *Street*

*Fighter IV* remains the purist's choice, but *Marvel* is fighting games' true spectator sport, its spectacular chaos, unpredictable action and uneven odds whipping crowds into a frenzy. It is second only to *SFIV* on Evo finals day, and still takes top billing at many tournaments.

But only in the US. Japan, still the best nation in the world at fighting games, has never really taken to *Marvel*. Its secrets and trickery have been discovered not in the arcades of Akihabara, but on consoles across America. It is a thoroughly unusual fighting game for many reasons, but the biggest might just be that its competitive scene is dominated by the US. In Japan, it is part of the 'kusoge', or 'shitty' scene, a subculture that embraces the broken and the silly.

One of its members, 'Kusoru', turned up at a tournament in Atlanta in 2012 with a ridiculous team of Rocket Raccoon, Frank West and Viewtiful Joe that no one had ever seen, pulling faces at the camera and trolling his opponents on his way to first place. It was *Marvel* in microcosm, an unknown player showing off a ludicrous new tactic he'd found in a pool of three-million possibilities, wowing the crowds and sending an entire playerbase scurrying off to Training mode to work out how to counter it. If it is ever to be taken seriously on a worldwide scale, and sell the sort of numbers that the faces on its cover deserve, *Ultimate Marvel Vs Capcom 3* is in dire need of a couple of dozen patches. But those who love it wouldn't have it any other way. ■
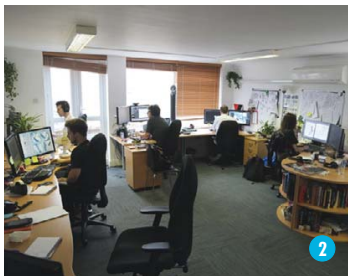
# STUDIO FOCUS

## FUTURLAB

**Location** Brighton, UK
**Founded** 2003
**Employees** 8
**URL** www.futurlab.co.uk







**Key staff**
James Marsden
(managing director),
Kirsty Rigden
(operations director),
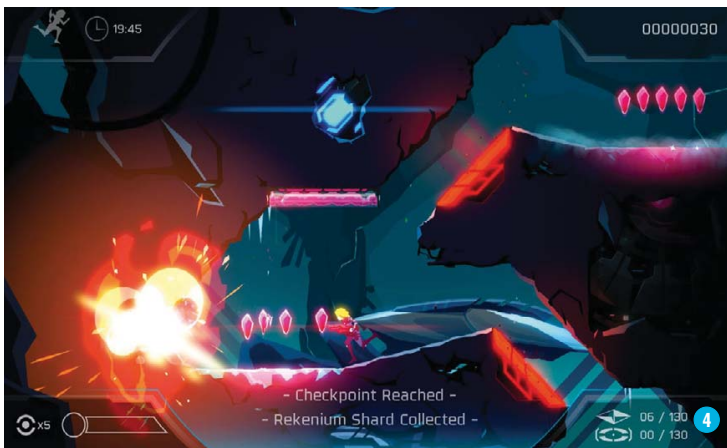Hussain Sheikh,
(technical director)

**Selected
softography**
*Surge Deluxe*,
*Velocity Ultra*,
*Velocity 2X*

**Current projects**
TBA



The critically lauded *Velocity 2X* (**1**, **4** and **5**) debuted on PlayStation Vita and PS4 in 2014, and recently made the move to Xbox One and PC. The game continues in the vein of *Velocity Ultra*'s vertically scrolling shooting, but also incorporates on-foot puzzle-platforming sections. **2** Eight staff work at FuturLab, but the studio is in the process of recruiting four additional members to the team. **3** The company is located in Brighton, home to a lively hub of companies working in games. **6** FuturLab created *Surge Deluxe* in 2014. The Vita match-three title sees players directing electrical currents to the accompaniment of a soundtrack by frequent musical collaborator Joris de Man



**James Marsden,
managing director**

"FuturLab is an award-winning studio best known for its *Velocity* series, including the recent *Velocity 2X*. Based one block from the beach in the vibrant city of Brighton in the UK, the studio is now expanding to develop multiple projects.

"What increasingly differentiates FuturLab from other studios is that we make games that our team wants to play. We also have complete control over creative decisions as we own our own IP.

"Our team enjoys working here because there is mutual respect throughout, and everyone feels involved in producing something to be proud of.

"We also don't do crunch, as tired teams lose enthusiasm and make mistakes, which is often reflected in the overall quality of a game. We believe one of the reasons our games consistently gain critical acclaim is that they are made by a healthy and happy team.

"FuturLab is currently developing a new IP, which is a great challenge. With *Velocity 2X* we were building on the unique foundations established by the first game, so it was relatively straightforward, but now we're back to inventing, and we're reminded just how challenging it is to create something new. Every few days there's a breakthrough, and staring us down a few yards ahead is a new brick wall. It's an exciting and satisfying challenge, which is what we're here for!" ∎

**JAMES LEACH**

# Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

I've never played *Candy Crush Saga*. This isn't some annoying hipsterish stance, like refusing to watch a Star Wars film, or never drinking vanilla decaf sourced from Irkutsk. I just haven't. I don't even know what it is.

As a so-called industry professional, I probably should. If I had a quid for every time I've been asked if I've played this game or that game, I'd have a jar containing a load of quid. The people who do it most are developers, simply as a shortcut – a way of not having to explain some highly specialised feature or facet they need me to know about in the context of the game they want me to help with. But it's a tricky one, as the truth is that every year, more and more games are released, and since I can't even hope to play them all, the ratio of games I've played to the number of games that exist is decreasing.

It's embarrassing, though, to be asked whether I've played *Chasm Of Oblivion* or some other interchangeably generic title and to have to say no. Saying yes and hoping to get away with it is never an option. That's a well-stocked minefield. The first thing that can go wrong is simple incomprehension.

They'll say, "Our game needs to do the thing, that… oh, have you played *Book Of Mercury*?" I say I have. I don't even know that *Book Of Mercury* is a thing. It sounds dangerous and, frankly, if it *is* in fact a book, tricky to read at room temperature. So they cheerfully go on. "You know the splitform particle element? We're going for a gritty retake on that. Without those irritating photon maps but we like the bit when Hiru resets the Higgs bosons to mate with the star core. You know." Having mired myself, I spend 60 minutes nodding at the gibberish they're now telling me. And I note that I have to buy *Book Of Mercury* stat, and find out what they're talking about. And I find out that it's a 1990 Neo Geo game that no one bought.

The next problem is simply getting it wrong. Am I aware, they ask, of *Call Of Duty: Red Ops*? It's vital that I am. I sigh with relief – I know *Call Of Duty* well. The conversation

> I certainly don't want to be the one person in the industry who hasn't played Reflection Of The Vampire Pt VII

forges on and I radiate confidence. I even tell them what I liked about the game, and what would work in the project we're undertaking. There are three blank faces opposite me. And one disgusted/angry one. It turns out that I am referring to *Call Of Duty: Blue Ops*. Which, as we all know, was a puzzle game offshoot set in Neolithic times that involved building Stonehenge while early Nazis threw pebbles from a nearby long barrow. I've made a fool of myself and wasted everybody's time. I spend the train journey home crumpling up my notes and wondering whether now is the time to become a kitchen fitter. Although I know

what would happen. Someone would ask me if I know the Monaco with oak doors. I'm diligent and am convinced I do. So I fit the Montpelier suite with all the laburnum extras, and I get summarily executed.

Even genuinely knowing games isn't enough. A producer once asked me if I was familiar with the Bullfrog game *Syndicate Wars*. I was pleased to tell him I'd actually worked on it. He nodded and asked me if I'd actually played it. And again, I was very clear about the fact I'd worked on it. He was a tough cookie and asked again if I'd played it. I knew beyond all doubt that, for a year, I'd worked on that game and I told him so. He ended up asking that one same question 17 times before I left to pick up a job application form from Moben three doors down.

But my fear is not that complicated. When someone who's hiring me asks me anything, I really want to say yes. I want to provide solutions. I certainly don't want to be the one person in the industry who hasn't played *Reflection Of The Vampire Pt VII*. Imagine the shame. So only once in my life have I turned the tables. Dragged to a far-off meeting, I was kept waiting for ages, I didn't get to see the people I expected, I was treated like an afterthought. So when we talked about the job, I tried out a new tactic. I told them that what they wanted from their story had worked well in the *Kingdom Power Rush* games. Chiefly in the second episode, *The Caves Of Ramillian*. Of course, I'd just made all this up.

The team nodded and I felt superior for a second. Then two of them got their phones out and started Googling. Blushing, I had to tell them how 'Ramillian' was spelt. For some reason, they told me, it didn't appear to be mentioned by anyone, ever. So, panicking, I put them off the scent by talking about *Candy Crush Saga*, asking to use the bathroom, and furtively triggering the fire alarm. So there we have it. Retrospective shame, basically, is the reason I can never play *Candy Crush Saga*.

*James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio*

Illustration **box-kite-curve.com**